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the PHOENIX

Number 13 December 1996

Final Atlas a Stage Closer

When I started the ABBA project in 1984 I estimated that it would take 15 years to complete the project. At that time I had no sponsor and bodies such as the NCWCD and NARC did not even exist. The 15 years included an estimated ten years to collect enough data from representative areas to make the project viable. It seemed in 1984 that there was no hope of getting records from even half the squares. However with the subsequent establishment of the NCWCD and organised recording in Oman and the UAE and the gaining of proper sponsorship, it has been possible to collect good data from more or less the whole of the peninsula. The number of professional bird people in Saudi Arabia, the Emirates and Oman, the establishment of ornithological tourism to Arabia has of course made a tremendous difference to quality and quantity of the data collected for the project, as have the OSME surveys of Yemen. The overall result is a level of coverage far above that I had dared hope for back in 1984. All of these inputs are now coming together for the final Atlas.

The Atlas project has from the start been a collective effort by many people and so it will be with the final product. The individual species accounts will, as far as possible, be written by those with a special interest or knowledge of the species. To date 100 species accounts are being prepared by approximately 20 authors, but the list is growing all the time. There are other species accounts not yet allocated so any readers who feel they have sufficient knowledge of a species to contribute the account should get in touch. Each species author gets a set of guidelines on how the accounts are constructed, a printout of all the ABBA data on that species, as well as literature lists, up-to-date maps etc. A small review team will ensure a conformity of style throughout. In the last year a great effort has been made to accession literature records to the database and much work has been done in this respect by Anne and Steve Newton, previously of the NWRC at Taif, Saudi Arabia. The work on literature records will continue until publication of the final Atlas.

Since the issue of *Phoenix* 13 only one ABBA Survey, No. 19

which was to central south Saudi Arabia, has taken place. A summary report of that survey is enclosed in this issue along with a report on Survey 18 to Dhofar province, Oman in October/November 1995.

Finally, one or two people have advised they have had difficulty in obtaining a copy of the *Interim Atlas* which was published in 1995. Unfortunately there is no distributor for this book at present however readers may write to the NCWCD, PO Box 61681, Riyadh 11575, Saudi Arabia to ask for a copy. The cost is £8 which includes postage and packing.

Michael Jennings

PS Sandgrouse Readers: Through the generosity of the Ornithological Society of the Middle East this issue is being distributed free to OSME members. Those OSME members who are not familiar with the ABBA project and would like more information may write to the address on Page 24.



Fig 1 Bonelli's eagle *Hieraetus fasciatus* bred within a few kilometres of Riyadh city centre in 1996. See page 24.

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New Breeding Species

427 Purple gallinule *Porphyrio porphyrio*

Breeding at Jahra pool (NB35), Kuwait was confirmed this year when a pair with three chicks were seen by Thomas Spencer and Charles Pilcher over a period of several days. (Further details awaited).

Skylarks Displaying in Qatar

Eurasian skylarks *Alauda arvensis* are scarce winter visitors to Qatar, and recorded as "common" and "rather scarce" winter visitors to the neighbouring UAE and eastern Saudi Arabia (C Richardson 1990: *The Birds of the United Arab Emirates*, and Bundy et al 1989: *Birds of the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia*) respectively. However, in Qatar individuals have also been observed during Spring performing the typical aerial display song flight. This has been noted in 1990, 1993, 1995 and 1996.

The details are:

9 March 1990; a single bird was singing and hovering high over a natural grove of trees in Ras Abruq (QB28) in western Qatar. The grove was carpeted with an unusually high growth of the leguminous herb *Trigonella* in flower, following heavy December rains.

1 March 93; at Umm Salal Ali (RA27) one was observed giving a song flight display by John Oldfield.

24 February 1995; three observers found at least five individuals singing repeatedly over a period of more than one hour at a large farm near Mukeinis (RA27).

8 March 1996; a bird was identified by song by a visitor familiar with the species in Europe. The bird was hovering very high and sang vigorously, over fields of a leguminous crop in another part of the same farm as the 1995 record.

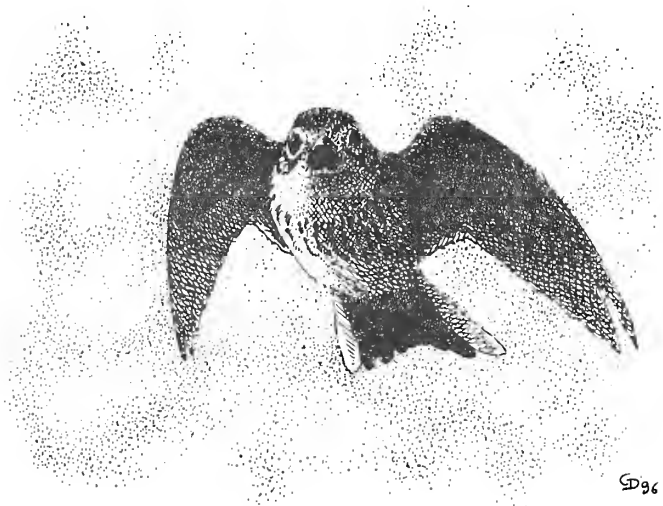


Fig 2 Skylarks *Alauda arvensis* have joined the lengthening list of potential breeding birds with singing and courtship noticed in Qatar.

None of the sites were visited in the days immediately before or after the observations. All the observations were after periods of higher than usual rainfall.

According to Richardson (1990) the skylark has recently increased in numbers as a winter visitor in the Arabian Peninsula (the southern limit of its wintering range) from nesting grounds in north-east Europe and central Russia. The nearest breeding areas are in Turkey, where it is resident, and northern Iran, as a summer visitor.

These observations suggest that the skylark is a potential breeding species in Arabia, and further attention ought to be paid to it during spring.

Bob Nation, 96 Home Street, Winnipeg, R3G 1W9, Canada.

Recent Reports

The following are a selection of some of the more interesting, unexpected or unusual records of Arabian breeding birds received within the last 12 months. Some relate to earlier years. Not all these records have been verified and some may not yet be accepted by local recorders.

Masked booby *Sula dactylatra*

Hundreds of pairs nesting at all stages from eggs to young about to fledge, Qibliyah island (WA11), 23 March 1995 (Oman Central Record).

Green heron *Butorides striatus*

Thirteen passed an observation point on Farasan Kebir (IA10) southern Red Sea at dusk (1842-1907 hrs) on 27 July 1995 (M Gregory). An unusually high number. Dusk appears to be the time that this species is most frequently seen as they leave the shelter of the day to fly to their nocturnal feeding grounds.

Reef Heron *Egretta gularis*

Fifty nests, some with young, discovered 25 May 1996, during an Environment Department Survey of a flat rocky island in the "Inland Sea" (RA26), Qatar (reported by R Nation).

Barbary falcon *Falco pelegrinoides*

Three downy young in cliff face nest Bani Yazid (see *Phoenix* 12:4) 28 April 1996 (G R Lobley).

Houbara *Chlamydotis undulata*

Female with a two week old chick central Oman (XA17), 4 May 1995 (Oman Central Record).

Crab plover *Dromas ardeola*

A midday roost of 368 on Farasan Kebir (IA10) on 25 July 1995 (M Gregory). On Shaghaf island Masirah (YB17) 264 old nest holes were counted, 29 August 1995 (Oman Central Record).

Spotted thick-knee *Burhinus capensis*

A nest with two eggs central Oman (XA16), 9 May 1994 (Oman Central Record).

Sooty gull *Larus hemprichii*

An estimated 10,000 pairs, hundreds of nests with eggs and

small chicks Shaghaf island (YB17), Masirah, 28 August 1995 (Oman Central Record).

Didric cuckoo *Chrysococcyx caprius*

A recently fledged young bird being fed by weavers Dhofar (UA11), Oman, 7 October 1994 (Oman Central Record).

Budgerigar *Melopsittacus undulatus*

Birds seen throughout the year Dharan (PB29) and regularly at bird tables Spring 1996 (R Wellington).

Palm swift *Cypsiurus parvus*

Two palm swifts at al Ain (VB25) UAE on 20 February 1996 was the first record for UAE and first record away from the Tihama of south-west Arabia (*Gazelle: Dubai Nat Hist Soc Newsl.*, Vol 11(4):5). This extralimital occurrence could have involved birds from either south-west Arabia or India.

Bar-tailed desert lark *Ammomanes cincturus*

First breeding of the species in Kuwait (NB36) in May 1996, when juveniles being fed by adults (P Cowan & CWT Pilcher)

Hoopoe lark *Alaemon alaudipes*

Nest about 1.2 m above ground in a concrete block on an old fuel drum contained three eggs (TB13) 3 June 1995 (Oman Central Record). No previous nest described from a manmade structure.

Short-toed lark *Calandrella brachydactyla*

A female at a nest with three eggs, Oman (WB25) 5 May 1995. First confirmed breeding for Oman (Oman Central Record).

Nightingale *Luscinia luscinia*

Two males singing and territorial chases observed from 15 - 31 April 1996 in an area of dense bushes and scrub near Dharan (QA29) Eastern Province, KSA (R Wellington). A species worth looking out for in future?

Graceful warbler *Prinia gracilis*

This bird is spreading its range in northern Kuwait since first breeding there in 1990 (CWT Pilcher).

Booted warbler *Hippolais caligata*

During May/June 1995, birds were observed in mangroves near Jubail (PB31) and exhibited agitated behaviour as if breeding (P Symens).

Brahminy mynah *Sturnus pagodarum*

A pair had three fledged young with them on 6 July 1996 in Zabeel Gardens (VA25), Dubai (*Gazelle: Dubai Nat. Hist. Soc. Newsl.*, Vol 11(9):5) Whilst suspected of breeding several times previously this is the first proven breeding record.

House sparrow *Passer domesticus*

Bred successfully Das island, UAE (SB27) June 1995 (S Aspinall).

Pale rock sparrow *Petronia brachydactyla*

Juvenile being fed by an adult north of Kuwait city (NB36) in 1996 was the first confirmed breeding in Kuwait (CWT Pilcher).

Golden-winged grosbeak *Rhynchostruthus socotranus*

Two on 26 April 1996 in juniper habitat in the Hedjaz highlands at square HA18, (G R Lobley). The northernmost record for this species.

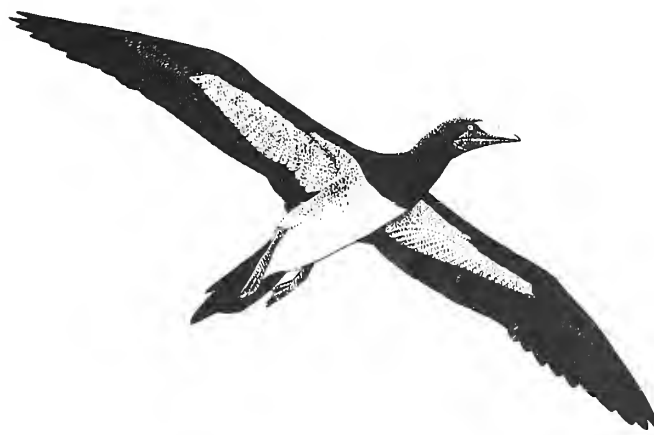


Fig 3 Over 8,000 brown boobies including 590 breeding pairs (on 19 islands) were recorded during the 1996 survey of Saudi Arabia's Red Sea seabird colonies. See page 5.

Sites of Interest

This column aims to provide details of the variety and diversity of bird habitats throughout Arabia and the representative birds to be found in each. The series of site reports appearing in the issues of *Phoenix* are not meant to be a "where to watch birds in Arabia" or a directory to the most prolific bird sites, although a number of them are exceptionally good bird areas.

Observers are invited to write up other sites, especially those that they have studied reasonably well, drawing special attention to the breeding and resident species that occur. A site may be as small as a sewage pond or similar microsite, an urban area or a whole mountain range.

Sharawrah - a town in the Empty Quarter

Sharawrah (NA11) is a medium sized town that sits on the south central edge of the Empty Quarter. It is a town with artificial origins, having been built in the 1970's for administrative and security reasons, on the remote southern edge of Saudi Arabia.

When I first visited Sharawrah on 5 March 1987 (ABBA Survey No 3) the only resident and presumably breeding bird seen in the vicinity of the town was the hoopoe lark *Alaemon alaudipes*. Despite a search I failed to find palm or collared doves, *Streptopelia senegalensis* and *S. decaocto*, neither could I find any house sparrows *Passer domesticus* or crested larks *Galerida cristata*. Great grey shrike *Lanius excubitor* were seen in the square but as they could have been a migrant at that time of year, were not regarded as breeding. In March 1987 it appeared that the extreme isolation of Sharawrah, separated from other towns by 300 kms of arid desert in every direction, and its recent establishment meant that none of the species normally associated with man had yet reached this spot.

Since the 1987 visit I have been very keen to keep a note of the

colonisation of Sharawah by commensal species but there have been no reports from other observers from the town in the meantime. I was not able to visit the town again until 25-26 March 1996 (ABBA Survey No 19). On the second visit I was able to add rock dove *Columba livia* and brown-necked raven *Corvus ruficollis* to resident birds of square NA11 but these were probably there in 1987 and missed. The only truly new resident bird in the town, and which has clearly arrived since 1987, was the palm dove. Indeed they were quite numerous. Surprisingly the Eurasian collared dove, house sparrow and crested lark have still not colonised Sharawah. The nearest places they occur on the Saudi Arabian side are; collared dove at 400 kms to the north east (al Faw, LA16), crested lark about 200 kms due west (LA12) and the house sparrow is found about 100 kms due west. In 1996 I spent a total of about six hours searching in the region of the town, including a large area of cattle pens and a rubbish dump and I feel sure if any of those mentioned above had been present I would have seen them. House sparrows and crested lark also occur about 300 kms to the south-east in the Wadi Hadramaut area of Yemen.

MCI

Aden wetlands - Yemen

The Aden Wetlands are a complex of habitats adjacent to Aden city which together form one of the most important areas for wading birds and other waterfowl in southern Arabia. The site regularly holds over 10,000 waterfowl including 12 species with regionally important populations and three globally threatened species. The site is relatively free of disturbance and provides extensive feeding areas for a huge variety of birds. The main components of the site are shown at Fig 4. The most important part of the wetlands is the Aden Marshes, an area of some 50 ha. of pools, flooded marsh (grazed by cattle and sheep), typha reeds and mesquite *Prosopis juliflora* woodland. All are fed by the run-off of treated effluent from the nearby sewage treatment works. The rest of the site includes the sewage treatment works (comprised of concrete lagoons for the treatment of effluent), four large lagoons on the east side of the Aden causeway and various beaches and intertidal mudflats. Not unexpectedly there is much interchange of birds between the lagoons, marsh and intertidal areas.

No survey has been undertaken of the breeding birds of these wetlands and the area is clearly more important for migratory and wintering species than the breeding birds. However, the following species breed, or may breed; green heron *Butorides striatus*, cattle egret *Bubulcus ibis*, reef heron *Egretta gularis*, moorhen *Gallinula chloropus*, black-winged stilt *Himantopus himantopus*, spur-winged plover *Hoplopterus spinosus*, kentish plover *Charadrius alexandrinus* and Saunders' little tern *Sterna saundersi*. The lesser flamingo *Phoenicopterus minor* has attempted to breed again recently with 172 nest mounds being constructed. This is the only site in Arabia it has attempted to breed. (For details of an old breeding attempt in the Aden area see *Phoenix* 2:2). Some 9,200 were counted at the wetlands in March-April 1996, the largest concentration anywhere in the Middle East. In addition to waterbirds the marshes are an important watering source for chestnut-bellied sandgrouse *Pterocles exustus*; in April 1996, 2,255 were recorded flying in each morning to drink at the pools.

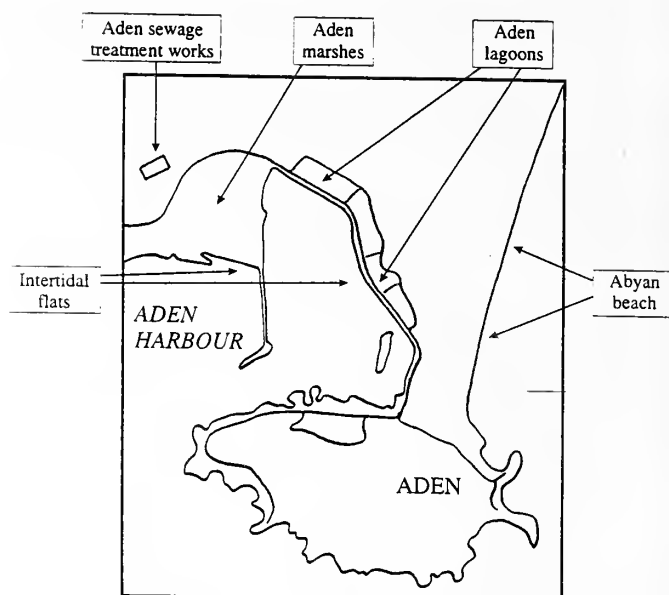


Fig 4 Aden, showing the main components of the wetland complex.

The wetlands are primarily a feeding and roosting area for migratory waterbirds in spring, autumn and winter. Some significant records and the highest counts for anywhere in Yemen are: reef heron, 300; black egret *Egretta ardesiaca*, a single record, the first for Yemen/Arabia; black-headed heron *Ardea melanocephala*, 3; sacred ibis *Threskiornis aethiopicus*, 4; African spoonbill *Platalea alba*, 3 - the only Yemen record; crab plover *Dromas ardeola*, 300; redshank *Tringa totanus*, 500; broad-billed sandpiper *Limicola falcinellus*, 125; Caspian tern *Sterna caspia*, 200; great-spotted eagle *Aquila clanga*, 15+ and imperial eagle *Aquila heliaca*, 5. Many of these records constitute 1% or more of the regional population.

Some of the most important parts of the Aden wetlands are now subject to a development plan for a freeport. This could have a serious effect on certain bird programmes and BirdLife International will be ensuring the information gathered about the site, and especially the areas of greatest wildlife value, is fed into the decision making process.

Dr Omar al Saghier and Richard F Porter on behalf of BirdLife International

Field Guide to the Birds of the Middle East

At last there is a field guide that illustrates, in one volume, all the birds that regularly occur in Arabia including all those awkward endemic and Afrotropical specialties that have evaded illustration until now. So that's what Socotra buntings look like! Richard Porter and his co authors Steen Christensen and P. Schiermacker-Hansen have filled an enormous gap and very competently and comprehensively. Every *Phoenix* reader will have to have a copy.

The geographical area is relatively small, Turkey, Iran and Arabia and places in between, including Cyprus and Israel. Socotra island is included. It does not include any part of north Africa or Sinai. It deals with over 700 species. It is a natural

evolution of the earlier Hollom field guide which two of the present authors also co-authored and which, unfortunately, did not illustrate all birds occurring in the region.

The introductory chapters are short and to the point (6 pages) dealing with the region and species covered, escapes and introductions, taxonomic sequence and the arrangement of the species accounts and maps. The ABBA project was very pleased to provide detailed information to help prepare the maps (approx half the region covered) and this has been generously acknowledged. The main body of the book is split into two sections, the colour plates and the species accounts. There are 112 colour plates by four different artists. The illustration standard is high and accurate with several exceptionally attractive plates, making it one of the most presentable field guides around. One or two plates are a little crowded but then what field guide does not have this problem. Opposite the plates there is a map with breeding distribution shown in red. Those not breeding have no map and there are no winter or migratory ranges shown. Such matters are covered in the status comments. The size of the maps is very generous in fieldguide terms and they are very clear, allowing accurate distributions to be appreciated. Arabia has now the most accurate maps for this region which is not something that could be claimed before the commencement of the ABBA project. One oddity of the maps is a little box (not explained in the introduction) which shows Socotra slightly out of place and apparently to a different scale. Alongside the maps there are short notes on status and habitat and a species number that corresponds to the plates and the species accounts. The species accounts provide alternative names, size, descriptions including diagnostic features in italics, and voice where important or the species occurs regularly. As might be expected with these authors the illustrations and species accounts are slightly top heavy on raptors but many will see this as an advantage.

The book is finished off with a list for further reading, a full species list and indexes to english and scientific names.

The authors have done a very good job in giving Arabia a proper fieldguide that is a pleasure to hold. Highly recommended.

Hardback, 475 pages. Published in 1996 by T & A D Poyser, 24-28 Oval Road, London NW1 7DX, UK. ISBN 0-85661-076-3.

Survey of Summer Breeding Seabirds in the Saudi Arabian Red Sea

The bulk of Arabia's Red Sea coastline falls in Saudi Arabia. The abundant lagoons, mangrove swamps and myriad of offshore islands are amongst the most poorly documented ecosystems for breeding birds in the region. A glance at the *Interim Atlas* shows many gaps in the apparent distribution of seabirds and other breeding waterbirds along the length of the Red Sea. This has largely arisen due to the inclusion of only post-1984 records in the *Interim Atlas*, whereas the only comprehensive survey of seabirds was undertaken in 1982/83 by a MEPA/IUCN team. It is the latter that formed the basis of the Arabian account in Gallagher *et al.*'s contribution to ICPB's landmark publication on the status of the world's seabirds (Technical Report No. 2, 1984).

Recent events in the Arabian Gulf have shown the importance of having up-to-date knowledge of the location of seabird colonies, numbers of nesting pairs, breeding success and food requirements. This stimulated a wide-ranging reconnaissance survey of Red Sea seabirds by NCWCD during summer 1996. The survey covered the five week period between 1 June and 5 July and comprised 12 aerial surveys, coupled with two spells of groundwork on the Farasan Islands and one at the al Wajh Archipelago. Aerial surveys were planned to cover virtually every island identifiable on all the maps and reports that were available to us, except in the Farasans where a comprehensive survey had been conducted in 1993 by a Manchester Metropolitan University(MMU)/NCWCD team. We were also prohibited from flying in the vicinity of Jedda and in the Gulf of Aqaba, but these restrictions were in areas known to hold relatively few islands. Groundwork was aimed at assessing the effectiveness of aerial surveys and to give some indication of laying dates, clutch sizes and so on. Proof of breeding could be determined from the air for the following species: brown booby, cattle egret, western reef heron, spoonbill, swift tern and lesser crested tern, but could only be inferred for other species. However, we soon learned to read bird-flushing behaviour as a good indicator of likely nesting activity. Overall, seabird counts and habitat data were recorded for a total of 262 count units comprising 310 islands. Apart from the al Wajh Archipelago in the north, most were south of Jedda in the Farasan Bank (approximately al Lith to Shuqaiq), where some were up to 80 km offshore, and the Farasan Archipelago itself. We have yet to tot up the number of ABBA squares! Below we give brief highlights for the principal seabird species and the other colonial waterbirds that nest in the marine environment.

Red-billed tropicbird *Phaeton aethereus*: Only seen during ground surveys on the eastern Farasan Islands and Jazirat Raykhah (CA29) near al Wajh Town. At least three occupied cliff sites at the latter represent a considerable northerly range extension, on the arabian side, for this species, though not unexpected as they breed further north in the Egyptian Red Sea. At Farasan, a total of ten were seen on three occasions (maximum four) all within 10 km of Farasan Port (IA10). One occupied hole was located but the estimated breeding population could not be fixed more accurately than 2-5 pairs.

Brown booby *Sula leucogaster*: Over 8,000 counted during aerial surveys, with 590 nesting pairs recorded on 19 islands along the length of the Red Sea up to 28°N, excluding Farasan where the first eggs were laid during the last few days of the survey. Elsewhere the stage of nesting was highly variable, but mostly small to medium chicks in the north and eggs and small chicks at southern colonies. Nest sites varied from sandy beaches to flat, rocky island tops to sea cliffs. Some colonies near Kunfuda, active in Jan/Feb 1996, were again active in June/July.

Little green heron *Butorides striatus*: Mostly recorded during ground surveys at al Wajh and Farasan; at the latter many nests were in *Euphorbia* thickets beneath active Western Reef Heron and Spoonbill nests.

Cattle egret *Bubulcus ibis*: Two large colonies were active in the Kunfuda area and a smaller one near al Lith. 1050 nests were recorded with 1900 birds present at the three colonies.

Western reef heron *Egretta gularis*: Nesting recorded from the al Wajh Archipelago to the southernmost Farasans. The size of the breeding population could not be assessed accurately from the air as many pairs nest sub-canopy in the mangroves.

Spoonbill *Platalea leucorodia*: A total of 22 proven or probable colonies were identified from the air involving a minimum of 103 pairs. The total count was 280 with birds, recorded as far north as 28°. Nesting was most frequent south of Jedda, both on the Farasans and around al Lith. Only a single nest was seen in the north, near Umm Lajj Town (DA26).

Crab plover *Dromas ardeola*: We were unable to locate colonies from the air, including the one discovered on West Mandhar (Farasan, HB10) in 1993 by the MMU team. A new active colony was discovered on one of the inner islands in the al Wajh Archipelago (CB28). The colony on Murain (IA09) in the SE Farasans appeared deserted with a high density of cat tracks in the vicinity.

Sooty gull *Larus hemprichii*: A widely distributed species, most numerous in the Kunfuda and al Wajh areas. Breeding hard to prove from the air, though pairs flying from under bushes and amongst vegetation highly indicative of nesting. Nests had not been initiated on Farasan in early June but by the end of the month many were on eggs. Breeding was earlier at al Wajh, with running chicks recorded on 23 June (CA29).

White-eyed gull *Larus leucophthalmus*: Widespread and slightly more numerous than sooty gulls and with a greater tendency towards coloniality. Many pairs at three colonies in the al Wajh area were already incubating by 23-26 June, whereas on Farasan the first eggs were being laid at the end of the month or in early July. Most nests were in open sandy or gravelly situations.

Swift tern *Sterna bergii*: The majority of birds were associated with eight major colonies on the Farasan Bank. Numbers of nests per colony ranged between 100 and 700 and three were adjacent to lesser crested tern colonies. In the north only one definite (30 pairs) and one probable colony (15 pairs) were identified in the al Wajh area.

Lesser crested tern *Sterna bengalensis*: More numerous than swift terns but only 25% of birds counted were associated with the five identified colonies; all the latter were on the Farasan Bank. Colony size ranged between 60 and 550 nests. One interpretation of the scarcity of colonies may be that the main breeding season does not get underway until later in July.

White-cheeked tern *Sterna repressa*: Most common on inshore islands and the Farasan Archipelago. Colonies could not be reliably located from the air though most flocks rising from sandy or gravelly substrates above the high water mark probably represented nesting locations. Small colonies (10-50 pairs) are often located on islands with large bridled tern populations and these were often overlooked from the air. Egg laying commenced in late May on Farasan, with clutches ranging from one to three but averaging 1.6-1.8 in different colonies. Greater variation in clutch size was recorded in the al Wajh Archipelago (means 1.1-2.1) though lower values could

reflect re-lays after original clutches had been collected by local fishermen.

Bridled tern *Sterna anaethetus*: The most abundant and widespread breeding seabird. The aerial count total of just under 20,000 is likely to be a gross underestimate. Most nests were under bushes but a few small colonies on Farasan use rock overhangs on cliffs in the absence of vegetation. Both the al Wajh and Farasan Archipelagoes hold large populations and the species is abundant on the well vegetated outer islands of the Farasan Bank where it co-occurs with the brown noddy. Clutches were always of a single egg and hatching commenced in mid June.

Brown noddy *Anous stolidus*: A total of 8,700 were counted from the air on islands of the Farasan Bank and Archipelago. Breeding occurred on 17 of the 37 islands where the species was recorded; virtually all colony islands had dense cover ($\geq 70\%$) of tall *Suaeda fruticosa* bushes. The only exception was Abu Shugur on Farasan where they utilize mangroves. At the latter colony nesting seemed fairly asynchronous, with both eggs and large chicks (out of the nest) present on 30 June.

Other species: Summer breeding was not proven for pink-backed pelican *Pelecanus rufescens* mostly occurring in winter (see Newton & Symens, *Colonial Waterbirds* 19: 56-64, 1996); purple heron *Ardea purpurea*, good numbers seen around Qishran mangroves near al Lith; goliath heron *Ardea goliath*, most recorded south of Jedda but at least eight present at the al Wajh archipelago; Caspian tern *Sterna caspia*, usually a late winter nester and Saunder's little tern *Sterna saundersi* on Farasan most clutches are initiated in April. Over-summering grey heron *Ardea cineria* were widely recorded. One intriguing aerial observation was of a single adult masked booby *Sula dactylatra* "sitting" on top of a bush on one of the outer Farasan Bank islands; three or four low passes were made before the bird reluctantly flushed. The species has been recorded nesting in trees in other parts of the world, so could this constitute the first possible breeding record for Saudi Arabia?

Overview: Over 66,500 waterbirds were recorded during aerial surveys, but comparative pairs of aerial and ground counts indicate that the former underestimate actual populations and the overall total present may approach 200,000. This total could include 77,400 pairs of true seabirds. No major changes were apparent between 1993 and 1996 surveys on the Farasan Islands. Methodology and timing of surveys were markedly different between 1982/83 and 1996 but there are indications of major increases in both gulls, swift, white-cheeked and bridled terns, and relative stability in brown boobies, lesser crested terns and brown noddies. A more detailed analysis of trends on an island by island basis will be prepared after both datasets are entered into the ABBA database.

Stephen F. Newton & Abdullah H. al Suhaibani, NCWCD, POB 61681, Riyadh 11585, Saudi Arabia. (Present address for correspondence of SFN is Glenbeg, Kinsalestown Hill, Delgany, Co. Wicklow, Ireland).

ABBA Coverage Changes

Eritrea occupies the Yemen island of Greater Hanish, southern Red Sea

Eritrea, Africa's newest nation and one of its poorest, caused international concern in December 1995 when it occupied the Greater Hanish Island in the Hanish Group (IB04) of the central, southern Red Sea. This group of islands which includes Greater and Lesser Hanish and Zuqar islands has always been recognised as part of the Republic of Yemen but the Eritreans appear to harbour historical claims. A spokesman at the Yemen Embassy in London advised (November 1996) that the two countries had agreed on an arbitration formula to resolve the dispute. It is expected that a panel of judges will meet in London in February or March 1997, under the aegis of the International Court of Justice to decide on the issue. The value of the islands is not the seabird colonies as one might expect but the possibility of oil deposits between the islands and the African shore.

More Borders determined

It is understood that the governments of both the Republic of Yemen and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia have recently agreed their respective borders with the Sultanate of Oman. The border is as shown at Fig 5. The Yemen/Oman border is basically a straight line between 19°N, 52°E and the coast with a small kink in SB11. Note that tiny parts of squares SB10 and SA12 are in Oman. The Saudi Arabian/Oman border is now more or less three straight lines as shown on the diagram. These changes tidy up the border from that shown on the ABBA maps which will be amended in due course.

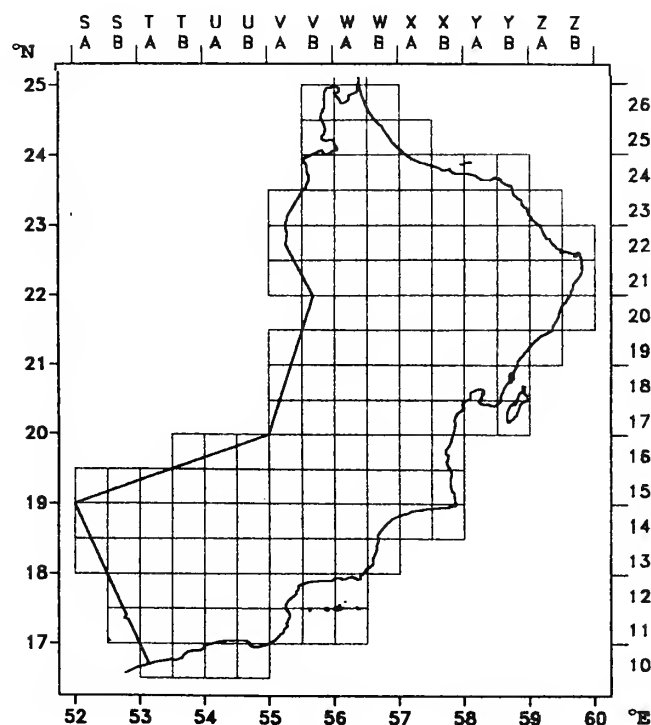


Fig 5 Oman (excluding Musandam) showing straight line borders with Yemen and Saudi Arabia.

A Visit to Dhofar Province, Oman; October/November 1995 (ABBA Survey No. 18)

This was my second visit to southern Oman, and on this occasion the main objective was a private holiday with my partner Carol Qirreh. We had other activities on our agenda besides birds but were, never-the-less, able to see a good number of species and visit a range of habitats. Late autumn is not a good time for breeding birds anywhere in Oman and a two wheel drive hire car meant that the degree of mobility enjoyed on other ABBA surveys was absent, but several interesting observations were obtained. I also got a better feel for the variety of habitats that exist in this most interesting of Arabian corners.

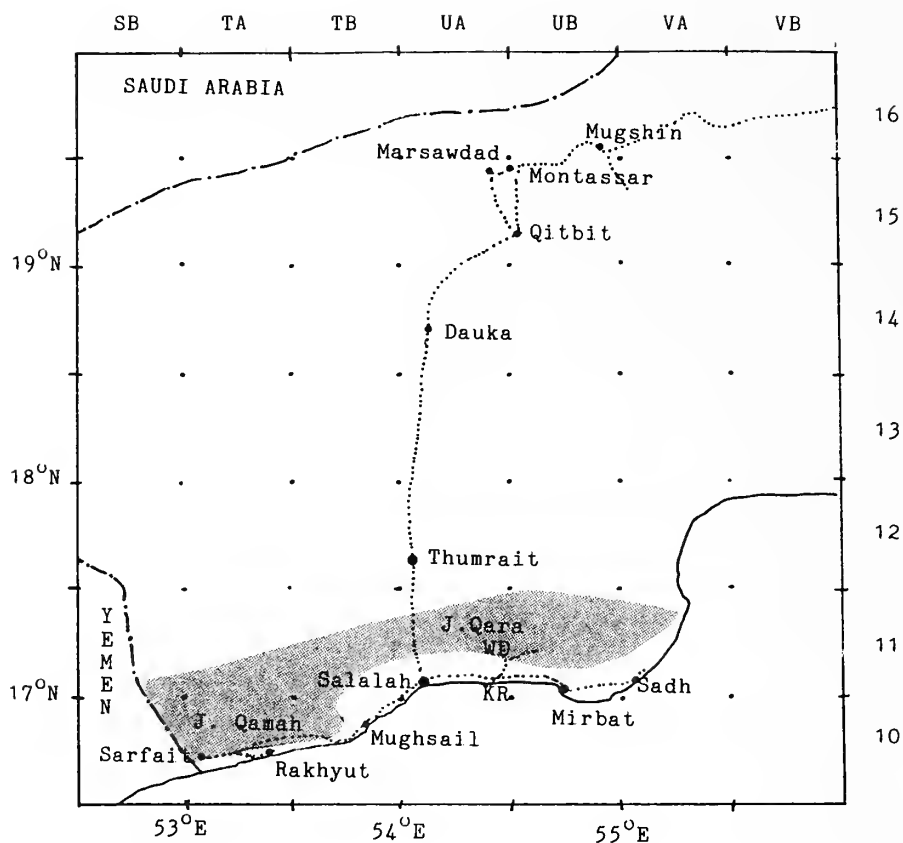
We arrived in Oman on the evening of 26 October and headed south from Muscat the next day. Although it is easily possible to drive the whole way to Dhofar in a day we enjoyed a leisurely progress and camped two nights on the way. Once near Sanaw and the other near Mugshin. The second night was spent in VA15, a square for which the ABBA database showed no records at the time. It is a desolate place but there had been good rains in this region in the previous March and as a result there was very much more vegetation present than I noticed when I passed this way with Colin Richardson in February 1992 (ABBA Survey 11). The only potentially resident birds seen in that square were rock dove *Columba livia* and hoopoe lark *Alaemon alaudipes*. The latter was actually singing and displaying.

Altogether we spent 12 days in the Dhofar region, camping in the Qara and Qamar hills and on the coast between Sadh (VA11) in the east and Rakhyut (TB10) in the west. Many of the hills have a remarkable vegetation cover, which in the summer monsoon is luxuriantly green but in autumn was turning brown and fast becoming overgrazed by the many camels and the local diminutive cows that are found everywhere in the hills. The vegetation cover was by no means continuous and depends on whether a particular hill or slope catches moisture from the summer monsoon. For example the hills above Rakhyut were covered with a variety of trees and underscrub but a dozen kilometres west along the coast at Sarfait, on the border with Yemen, the hills were dry and almost devoid of vegetation. However I know from my visit to the Yemen side in 1989 (ABBA Survey 8) that the woodlands continue for some kilometres into Yemen. At the other end of the Salalah plain, the region east from Mirbat to Sadh, was also extremely dry, where the only vegetation of any consequence were a few stunted *Boswellia* bushes.

Dhofar is justly famed for the variety of its birds. Many resident and migrant breeders are Afrotropical, whilst it also has a good complement of Palearctic desert birds. In addition there is a huge variety of Palearctic/African migrants and visitors going through in the autumn and spring. One of the best sites, especially for visitors, is Khor Rawri where water from Wadi Darbat forms a landlocked brackish water lagoon just by the coast. It is a spot where one could easily spend a month and still see new things each day, that is if you could live that long with the mosquitos. We spent four days there. We returned to

Fig 6 ABBA Survey No18 to Dhofar, Southern Oman, October - November 1995.

KR = Khor Rawri
WD = Wadi Darbat
Shaded area = over 600 m



Muscat after staying at the Qitbit guesthouse (UB15) one night and camped near Adam (XB21) another. We left Oman on the evening of the 12 November.

A few observations from the Dhofar area (and one or two from central Oman) are as follows;

Night heron *Nycticorax nycticorax*, group of nine at Khor Rawri 8 November.

Grey heron *Ardea cinerea*, a group of 51 at Khor Rawri pm 7 November, they had all gone the next morning.

Glossy ibis *Plegadis falcinellus*, observed on each visit to Khor Mughsaal and Khor Rawri, maxima of 8 and 14 respectively.

Lesser flamingo *Phoenicopeterus minor*, 18 at Khor Rawri on 29 October which were readily identified on account of their black looking bill. There were a similar number at Khor Rawri until 9 November. Another 23 were present at Khor Rakhyut on 5 November but the largest number were at Khor Mughsaal on 3 November when 270 were counted, with similar numbers there until 7 November. These were the first observations of large numbers lesser flamingos in Oman. Since then they have been recorded by many observers and there were many still around in November 1996 (E Hirschfeld). It was possible to compare lesser flamingos directly with the greater flamingos *Phoenicopeterus ruber* at all three sites. The most immediate distinguishing points are the dark heavy looking bill, it looks black at a distance but when viewed closely through a 'scope, the bill has a rather bluish/grey base. There is a very noticeable size difference between the two species, the lesser appears only about the body size of a grey heron or spoonbill when standing in water. Compared to the greater the lesser has

a very much less curvy neck (much less swan-like) and the neck is often held straight. Another good pointer is that as a flock the lessers are very noisy, continuously uttering growling and grunting noises. A further and remarkable record was of a dead bird on the highway, 28 km south of Ghaba rest house central Oman on 10 November. How it came to be there is anyone's guess as flamingos are not noted for resting on highways in deserts. Maybe it had been shot in the south and tossed out of a car going north?

Ruddy shelduck *Tadorna ferruginea*, One Khor Mughsaal, 3-7 November.

Pochard *Aythya ferina*, up to 32 Khor Rawri, 7-9 November.

Ferruginous duck *Aythya nyroca*, up to 11 Khor Rawri, 30 October to 9 November.

Egyptian vulture *Neophron percnopterus*, a few in central Oman and one Jebel Qara but none on the Salalah plain.

Lappet-faced vulture *Torgos tracheliotos*, one near Thumrait, 29 October.

Spotted eagle *Aquila clanga*, at least four at separate sites on the Salalah plain.

Imperial eagle *Aquila heliaca*, at least 12 at different sites in Dhofar, including five together at Khor Mughsaal, 6 November.

Golden eagle *Aquila chrysaetos*, a pair near Adam central Oman, 27 October.

Bonelli's eagle *Hieraaetus fasciatus*, one Jebel Qamar (TB10),

6 November.

Barbary falcon *Falco peregrinoides*, singles Rakhut 5 November and Jebel Qamar, 7 November and a pair near Adam, central Oman, 11 November.

Grey francolin *Francolinus pondicerianus*, heard just south of Sanaw (YA21), central Oman, 27 October

Common crane *Grus grus*, one Khor Rawri, 8 November.

Pheasant-tailed jacana *Hydrophasianus chirurgus*, at Khor Rawri numbers built up from one on 30 October to five on 9 November. Also one Khor Mughsail, 3-7 November.

Stone curlew *Burhinus oedicnemus*, one freshly dead on the road near Salalah, 9 November.

Spotted sandgrouse *Pterocles senegallus*, hundreds drinking at Montasser (UB15), central Oman between 0741 and 1025 hrs (the time we were present) on 10 November. Most drank in large groups but some individuals arrived and departed separately and at least two of these soaked their belly feathers by rocking backwards and forwards and thus must have had young at the time.

Eurasian collared dove *Streptopelia decaocto*, apart from the well known population at Salalah, there were three at Montasser on 10 November. Presumably these have come south from the population in the Emirates or northern Oman.

Hume's owl *Strix butleri*, one calling for a minute or so in Jebel Qamar (JB10) at 1840 hrs on 6 November. This appears to be a new site for the species in Dhofar and I believe the first time ever the species has been recorded from a site adjacent to the sea.

Bar-tailed desert lark *Annuomanes cincturus*, eight near Marsawdad (UA15), 28 October.

Citrine wagtail *Motacilla citreola*, two or three at Khor Rawri and Wadi Darbat.

African paradise flycatcher *Terpsiphone viridis*, four wadi Darbat 31 October.

Rare bird report forms have been submitted to the Oman Bird Records Committee for the lesser flamingo (with photographs) and the Hume's owl records.

Carol and I would like to record our grateful thanks to Ian Brown for his company and expert leadership on a thoroughly enjoyable visit to Wadi Darbat and for his advice on other places to visit. Thanks also to Gavin and Val Thomson for tips on visiting Dhofar following their own visit in Spring 1995. Our trip to Dhofar was an unsponsored private visit however the wider ABBA project continues to be sponsored by the NCWCD Riyadh.

New Books

Phoenix aims to give details of all new publications which are, in some way, relevant to the study of birds and wildlife in Arabia, or to the Arabian/Middle Eastern environment generally. Most titles mentioned are available in good book shops in Arabia, Europe and North America. Others are on restricted distribution or privately published and readers wishing to obtain copies should contact the author, publisher or distributor mentioned.

Alternatively, all the titles reviewed in this and earlier issues of *Phoenix* may be ordered through Subbuteo Natural History Books Ltd, Treuddyn, Nr Mold, Clwyd, North Wales, CH7 4LN, UK. When ordering through a library or agent quote the ISBN or ISSN number if given. The prices shown here are published prices, which sometimes include post and packaging. Recommendations made about books are based on the standard of treatment of the subject, format and quality of preparation. A recommendation does not necessarily mean good value for money. Readers are asked to provide details of other new, relevant titles not mentioned in this survey.

Status and Conservation of the Breeding Birds of the United Arab Emirates by Simon Aspinall (1996)

This book represents the first detailed coverage of all the breeding bird species found in the United Arab Emirates. The author is on the staff of the National Avian Research Centre (NARC) in Abu Dhabi and has had several years experience studying breeding and other birds in the UAE. To date some 400 or more species have been recorded in the UAE and of these just over 100 have bred, this latter group being the book's main concern. There is a short introduction to the Emirates which includes a selection of habitat photographs which identify the exciting variety of topography and biotopes one may find in this corner of Arabia. A detailed chapter on the conservation of birds in the UAE, lists regionally threatened species, for example those where more than one percent of the Middle East breeding population occurs in the UAE and those of global restricted range that breed there. Details are given of internationally important sites including wetlands with information on future conservation plans for species and habitats within the UAE. All conservation efforts in this part of Arabia present a struggle. The human population is growing and there are great pressures on a fragile environment for recreation, agriculture, land reclamation and industrialisation; not to mention the difficulties in organising national legislation in the federal government of the UAE. The species accounts cover all those birds that have, may have or might in future, breed in the Emirates including introductions. For each species local Arabic names are given with information on the world range, races and present knowledge of status in the UAE and the Middle East. For each species an estimate of the number of pairs inhabiting the Emirates is provided. Clearly the latter is very subjective but it does present a baseline on which to judge a species' progress in future. For each species there is information on those sites that are important to it and any threats, specific problems or conservation proposals that exist. There are 100 breeding maps for the regular breeding birds

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using the usual three size blob system, indicating possible, probable and proven breeding. The ABBA project is very pleased to have co-operated in the preparation of this detailed Emirates Guide which has a date one breeding season later than the information shown in the *Interim Atlas* and is therefore a more up to date reference for the UAE. Appendices cover other species possibly breeding in the UAE and additional released and introduced birds, as well as potential breeding species. There is also a listing of all the important bird areas and sites included in the *Middle East Wetlands Inventory* documented for the UAE and tables identifying those species where one percent of the population of the Middle East occurs in the Emirates. The quality of the 60 or so colour prints of birds is exceptionally high, both in terms of photographic skill and reproduction quality. Recommended.

The book is available in hard and soft back versions, 178 pages (235 x 165 mm) price (soft back) £14.99 (in UK includes postage) or DHS 110 from Colin Richardson, PO Box 50394 Dubai. It is published by Hobby Publications c/o Media Fine Limited, First Floor, Port of Liverpool Buildings, Liverpool, L3 1BX UK; with sponsorship from the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company. It is a report of NARC, PO Box 45553, Abu Dhabi, UAE. ISBN 1-872839-04-5 (soft back).

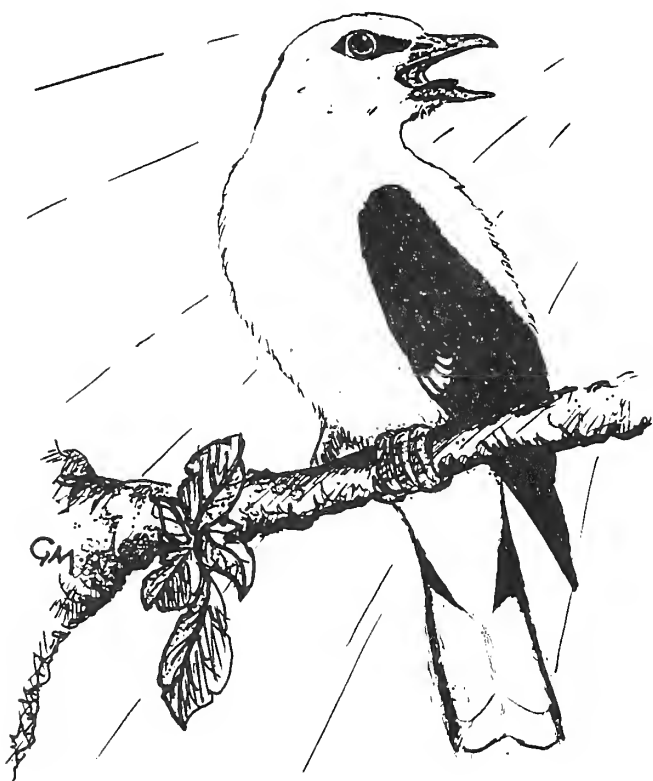


Fig 7 A pair of golden oriole *Oriolus oriolus* were seen for a few days in April 1996 in the Dharan area (QA29), Eastern Province, Saudi Arabia (R Wellington). They have bred in that district in previous years.

A checklist of the birds of the United Arab Emirates by Colin Richardson and Simon Aspinall (1996)

A comprehensive checklist of the status and occurrence of all the birds to be found in the area is essential for organised

recording and as a resource to birders in the field. This new list of the UAE birds meets the requirement extremely well. It was bang up-to-date when going to press in February 1996 (several changes since of course). There are 395 species on the main list. If the species is resident, regular or common the list provides a succinct account of the status and the occurrence, whereas details of individual observations are given for the rarities and vagrants with date, place and observer when appropriate. Races of species are mentioned where this is important. One useful innovation on the list is its treatment of important but imprecise records. For example "dark shearwaters" and "pelican sp" are included. Lists tend to omit this information but such observations are often important to put later records into proper perspective. There are two important appendices, one deals with introduced species that are breeding on a feral basis, these now total 14 species, and another lists the additional escaped birds that have been seen in a free-flying state within the UAE border, a staggering 50 species. This is a very authoritative book on the birds of the Emirates and anyone seriously interested in UAE birds must have one. Highly recommended.

Card cover, 51 pages (A5). Price £7 (includes p&p), cheques payable to Colin Richardson, c/o, Emirates Birds Records Committee, PO Box 50394, Dubai, UAE.

Songbirds of Turkey by C S Roselaar (1995)

The sub-title of this book is taxonomy, morphology and distribution - an atlas of bio-diversity of Turkish passerine birds. Thus at one level it is a very useful reference for anyone visiting Turkey who wants to find out where songbirds occur, and at another it provides detailed information on the taxonomy of birds of the near east. The introductory chapters deal with the habitats and vegetation types, and the relevance of altitude to bird distribution. There is a very good essay on geographical variation in birds, and another on endemic sub-species found in Turkey - there are 21 (three are non-passerines) and a further ten which just cross the borders of Turkey into nearby countries. The sources for the book are museum specimens and the literature over the last 100 years. Three new sub-species which were determined during a study of skins for the book are named. Records and specimens are plotted on maps providing a reasonably even spread throughout Turkey, except for some parts of central Anatolia which have been rather sparsely collected and recorded. The maps themselves are in bas relief showing altitude variations through the country. Red dots denote breeding localities, open dots represent possible breeding. Species accounts include scientific, English and Turkish names, habitat types (vegetation, altitude and geology) preferred by the species with comparisons to other close relatives. There is also information on commonality in each area of occurrence throughout Turkey, which puts the maps into context. Geographical variation is discussed for each sub-species that the author recognises for Turkey, with some descriptions and measurements. The author explains he has not included non-passerine birds because there are few skins, and very little recent data, on which to base a reasoned discussion of variation. There is in any event very little variation amongst non-passerines. However all non-passerines are mentioned in an appendix which provides names (including English and Turkish) and the races which occur in Turkey. There are no

illustrations in this book but it is recommended for anyone seriously interested in bird distribution and bio-diversity in the Middle East area.

Laminated card cover 240 pages (170 x 240 mm). Price £24. Published by Pica Press, The Banks, Mountfield, Roberts Bridge, East Sussex TN32 5JY. ISBN 1-873403-44-5.



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Habitats of the Jubail Marine Wildlife Sanctuary - an introduction and field guide by D A Jones, R N Fleming and H H At Tayyeb (1996)

The Jubail Marine Wildlife Sanctuary is located to the north of the Arabian Gulf city of Jubail, Saudi Arabia, and has an area of approximately 2,000 km². This report is a further fruit of the coalition between the NCWCD Riyadh and the European Commission. It provides a short introduction to the six main habitat types to be found in the sanctuary. After the introduction the guide deals with each habitat type, which are defined as terrestrial, wetland, intertidal (this sub-divides into rocky, sandy, muddy/mangrove), shallow subtidal, open water and offshore coral reefs and islands. For each there is a short text giving an overall view of the animal life present, both vertebrate and invertebrate. It is extremely well illustrated with

a total of 54 colour plates of animals and habitats and many line drawings which are also to a high standard. There is a conservation code for visitors to the sanctuary and a short bibliography. A very useful introduction and guide to marine habitats and wildlife in the Arabian Gulf.

Card covers 28 pages (A4), published by the Senckenberg Institute, Senckenberganlage 25, 60325 Frankfurt, Germany. Also available from NCWCD, PO Box 61681, Riyadh 11575, Saudi Arabia. ISBN 3-929907-21-6.

Seashells of Eastern Arabia by B T Bosch, S P Dance, R G Moolenbeek and P G Oliver (1995)

Previous publicity notices of this book have referred to it being a coffee table book. This is a slander because to many people the idea of a coffee table book is something with lots of wonderful pictures but rather superficial content. It certainly has the former but it is far from being superficial and will quickly become a standard reference on the molluscs of eastern Arabia and generally for the northern part of the Indian Ocean. The coverage extends from all coasts of the Arabian Gulf and Oman to the Yemen border. It is a comprehensive guide to all shells in the region, the work of a team who are all experts in their separate fields. Introductory chapters deal with the history of shell collecting in the eastern part of Arabia, shell habitats and the places mentioned in the text. The book is arranged by the five classes of molluscs. For the largest class, the gastropods; that is animals with a single shell which is often spirally coiled, some 864 species are dealt with. For the three small classes; the tusk shells, chitons and cephalopods, 30 odd species are mentioned. For the bi-valves, 378 species are included. Taxa are dealt with in a very workmanlike manner with short descriptions of the main characteristics of class, sub-class, order, superfamily, family (sub-family where appropriate) and species. For each species there is information on the author, size, description, habitat and distribution. The text is enlivened by notes in boxes on a whole variety of issues from the economic uses of shells, taxonomic problems, historical anecdotes and the collection of shells, making the whole thing very readable. The illustrations in this book are also quite magnificent. Almost all of the 1273 species dealt with are illustrated. The majority are illustrated by colour photographs, including all the larger shells, a number of the smaller duller ones are illustrated by black and white photographs and a few by line drawings. Overall a very impressive book. It is a must for everyone interested in molluscs and marine biology of Arabia. Highly recommended.

Hard back, 296 pages (240 x 310 mm). Price £50 or UAE Dhs 245 available from Motivate Publishing, 19 Old Court Place, London, W8 4PL or PO Box 2331, Dubai, UAE. ISBN 1-873544642.

New Arabic Books

Tayur Al Yeman (Birds of Yemen) by Richard Porter and Rod Martins (1996)

Bird Life International and OSME have worked together with the Yemen Environment Protection Council and Ministry of

Education to produce this first illustrated, Arabic guide to the birds of Yemen and their conservation. The guide, and an associated wall poster, will be distributed to all schools in Yemen; an ambitious project made possible by generous donations from several multinational companies active in Yemen. The guide introduces Yemeni school children to subjects such as bird migration, the interrelationships between birds and man, the importance of protecting the environment for birds and wildlife, and how to enjoy watching and studying birds. About 100 species are mentioned in the guide and are illustrated in colour, mainly the common everyday species but also the specialities of Yemen and the endemics. This book, which will probably be the first wildlife book to be seen by many young Yemenis concerning their own country, will undoubtedly have payoffs in the environmental education of a nation inhabiting a faunistically important corner of Arabia.

Card covers, 44 pages (A5 size). Distributed by BirdLife International, Wellbrook Court, Girton Road, Cambridge.

The Bald Ibis in Arabia

One of the more enduring ideas of Meinertzhagen in *Birds of Arabia* (1954) is his comment of the bald ibis *Geronticus eremita* that "there is probably a breeding colony in Yemen, not yet located". Successive authors have picked up on this statement and repeated it, creating in many people's minds the real possibility that the bald ibis breeds somewhere in Arabia. The relatively recent discovery of regular wintering birds at

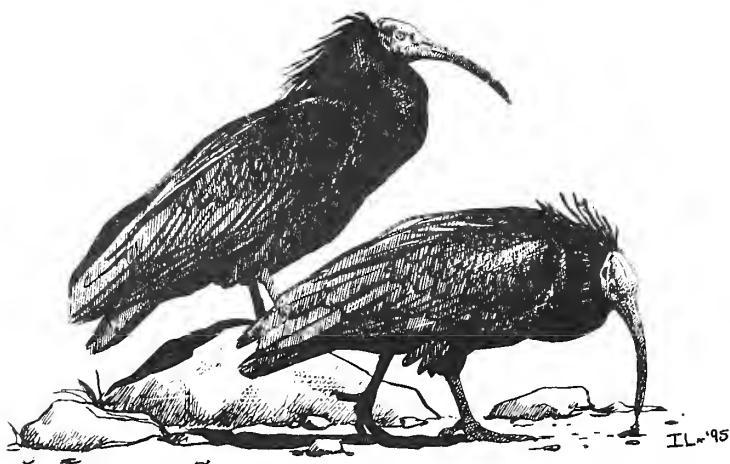


Fig 8 The bald ibis *Geronticus eremita* continues to turn up in Arabia during winter. The lack of a known nesting colony away from north Africa continues to feed speculation of breeding somewhere within Arabia.

Taiz in Yemen and in the Hedjaz, east of Taif, has added fuel to the suggestion of an Arabian breeding colony. Certainly the presence of unringed birds at these two sites suggests that they have come from somewhere other than the extinct Birejik colony of south-east Turkey, where all birds are thought to have been ringed.

Where RM got his idea from is uncertain, he only mentions three records for the Arabian Peninsula (one collected by himself) none of which suggested breeding. There are certainly plenty of suitable nesting sites which compare well with the breeding colonies found in North Africa and former ones in Asia minor. Perhaps he also had further, hearsay, evidence

which was not sound enough for publication? In this respect a remark of T E Lawrence in *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* is very intriguing. When Lawrence's band were sheltering from Turkish bombers on the ledges of a cliff in what is now Jordan, he remarked of them that they were "nesting like ibises in every cranny of its face". Lawrence's simile is not one that anyone else has used to my knowledge and no other ibis in the region nests on cliffs, the inference must surely be that he had seen a bald ibis colony somewhere. Perhaps he told Meinertzhagen? They had quiet a lot of contact and certainly exchanged bird observations. However Lawrence did also spend many months in Asia minor before the First World War and he may have seen the Birejik colony or another colony in the region. (At that time there were several hundred pairs at Birejik).

I have long ceased to be amazed at what turns up in Arabia and so it would not unduly surprise me to find that the bald ibis does, after all, breed somewhere on the peninsula, say in the northern Hedjaz. Elsewhere seems unlikely. However I feel, on the weight of negative evidence, that there is no such breeding colony in the part of Arabia covered by the ABBA project.

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Sooty Falcon on Abu Dhabi Islands

A fill-in survey of previously uncharted islands by staff from the National Avian Research Center (NARC) in Abu Dhabi in October 1996 more than doubled the previously estimated UAE national population of sooty falcons *Falco concolor*. Much data was collected on productivity and of prey species. A few notes on the latter are provided below.

The discoveries mean that the population of the Arabian Gulf islands is still only a vulnerable 50-60 pairs. This total is comprised of a maximum of 13 pairs on the Bahrain, Howar islands; one pair in Saudi Arabia; two or more pairs in the Musandam of Oman and about 35 pairs on Abu Dhabi islands. This number represents an important, if small, population of a species which is otherwise headquartered on islands in the Red Sea from Egypt and Saudi Arabia to Eritrea.

Prey was identified at nest-sites and the accompanying table is a simple preliminary computation of average autumn weights for each species gleaned from the literature and pers obs., multiplied by the number of individuals involved, to give a total biomass and thus a measure of the importance of each prey species. A fuller account is to be prepared in due course which will compare spring/summer and autumn diets in differing geographical locations. Identification of some prey remains is still to be completed, for example black-eared wheatear *Oenanthe hispanica* could have been overlooked in the mass of feathers. Also the lack of hirundines seems remarkable and certainly does not reflect their availability. Note also that some of the bridled terns *Sterna anaethetus* may not have been predated by sooty falcons.

Sooty falcons nesting on Arabian Gulf islands are coming under increasing pressure from development and disturbance. Their predilection to breed exclusively on islands in the Arabian Gulf is causing headaches in conservation circles. Urgent measures

are needed to safeguard the colonies at a time of mounting development proposals in the border regions of western Abu Dhabi.

Sooty Falcon prey: Abu Dhabi Islands Autumn 1996

Species	Number found	Average weight per bird (gm)	Total biomass (gm)
Bridled tern	13	120	1560
Quail <i>Coturnix coturnix</i>	10	100	1000
Hoopoe <i>Upupa epops</i>	2	55	605
Pied wheatear <i>Oenanthe pleschanka</i>	31	19	589
Nightjar <i>Caprimulgus europaeus</i>	7	65	455
Hoopoe lark <i>Alaemon alaudipes</i>	3	15	360
Rose-ringed parakeet <i>Psittacula krameri</i>	1	120	120
Turtle dove <i>Streptopelia turtur</i>	1	110	110
Palm dove <i>S. senegalensis</i>	1	110	110
Unident. small passerine	4	15	105
Blue-cheeked bee-eater <i>Merops superciliosus</i>	2	45	90
Isabelline wheatear <i>O. isabellinus</i>	3	28	84
Wheatear sp.	4	20	80
Rosy starling <i>Sturnus roseus</i>	1	80	80
Great grey shrike <i>Lanius excubitor</i>	1	45	50
Common swift <i>Apus apus</i>	1	40	40
Desert wheatear <i>O. deserti</i>	2	19	38
<i>Calidris</i> sp. (?minuta)	1	20	25
Short-toed lark <i>Calandrella brachydactyla</i>	1	22	22
Rufous bush robin <i>Cercotrichas galactotes</i>	1	22	22
Isabelline shrike <i>Lanius isabellinus</i>	1	21	21
Spotted flycatcher <i>Muscicapa striata</i>	1	15	15
Black-crowned finchlark <i>Eremopterix nigriceps</i>	1	15	15
Upcher's warbler <i>Hippolais languida</i>	1	12	12

Unident. small passerine = predominantly *Sylviidae*/*Motacillidae*.

Simon Aspinall, NARC, PO Box 9903, Sweihan, Abu Dhabi, UAE.

The Asir Magpie: Results of Recent Field Surveys

The Asir magpie *Pica pica asirensis* is an endemic bird of south-west Saudi Arabia whose population and distribution may have suffered a decline throughout its range in recent years. Though, morphologically similar to European and North American races, they have startlingly different calls. To determine its present status and distribution five surveys to the Asir region were made between February 1995 and July 1996. Considering the earlier reports of occurrence in wider areas, the small number recorded is a cause for concern. Phase two field surveys will entail in-depth study to the sites where potentially important populations of Asir magpies were recorded during the first phase. The paragraphs below represent a summary, a detailed report for each survey is lodged with the NCWCD documentation unit.

Status and population

The Asir magpie is a parochial, resident bird living in groups. Their normal daily foraging range appears to be 2-3 km from the roost site. However more data is required to confirm this.

A total of 147 bird sightings of 90 birds were recorded during the five surveys, between Taif (GA19) and Abha (IB13). Five were recorded at Jebel Soodah (IB13), 21 at Bil Ahmar (IA14), 26 at Bil Ismar, 16 at Tanoma and 22 at Jebel Qahar (IB12). We searched most of the known areas where magpies had been recorded previously. Considering the extent of areas we have covered a total of 90 birds, scattered in small isolated groups, is a very low population and is thus considered vulnerable. Previously the magpie has been reported from almost throughout Asir region, even up to Taif (but such northerly records have not been substantiated), their present existence is limited to Abha and 120 km northwards and at Jebel Qahar.

The Asir magpies live in groups throughout the year. Apparently even during the breeding season. On only one occasion did we observe an individual bird and only on three

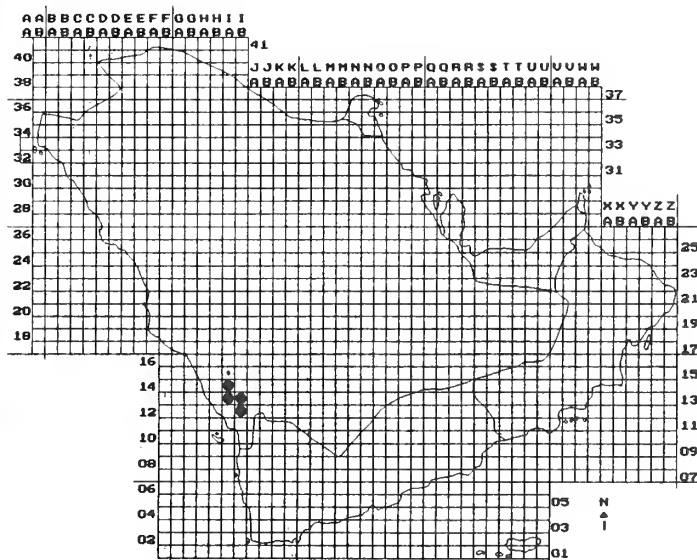


Fig 9 The magpie has one of the most restricted ranges of any Arabian breeding bird species.

occasions were two birds seen together. We presume that those seen individually or in pairs were also members of a group recorded nearby. The numbers recorded in each group size is: 7 (4 times), 6 (5 times), 5 (7 times), 4 (2 times) and 3 (once). It appears that each group consists of a family, including parents and young possibly of one or two broods. However more extensive observations are required to further comment on group structure.

Behaviour

The Asir magpie is a restless bird, from the time they leave the roost site (as early as 0520 hrs) and settle for roosting (as late as 1920 hrs) they keep on the move, calling and foraging. A total of about 17 hrs observations were made while following groups and birds were found active at all hours of the day. After emerging from roost site they disperse in the surrounding area up to about 200 meters, sit on the top branches of trees, call and preen alternately for a few minutes then move on. Almost all movements of each bird is combined with calling. Members of the group follow the leader by responding to calls. Birds were found feeding on garbage, very often beak fulls of boiled rice at picnic sites, fallen grain, the pulpy seeds of Juniper or picking insects from the ground and in vegetation. On one occasion they were recorded eating (*Ficus sp*) *hypenthodium*; the small fruits were swallowed intact, the larger ones were eaten a piece at a time.

Asir magpies are one of the most vocal birds in the area and keep on calling at all hours of the day revealing their whereabouts. One obvious reason for the calling is that the calls help them to keep together as a group. At least three types of calls are made by the magpies. A full loud "*Quaynk Quaynk*", is made when the bird calls from a top branch or while moving. Presumably this is the main contact call. A similar tone "*Quenk Quenk*", is uttered when the bird is searching for insects or under some stress, a sort of alarm call; while the young birds make a much softer "*Qua Qua*", which seems to be soliciting calls during food begging or following their parents.

Juniper trees, and well vegetated areas such as the bottoms of wadis (valleys) are used as roosting site. The same site is used permanently for a long time but the exact roost tree may change from day to day. At times these sites are also used for nesting. Various set patterns of pre- and post-roosting activities were recorded: preening and calling formed an important part of such major activities. On average Asir magpies roost for ten hours, but settle earlier on misty/foggy evenings. No day time siesta was recorded.

Breeding

Our survey itinerary did not allow prolonged observation on breeding biology but this study is proposed during the second phase of the study.

Two pairs of Asir magpies were recorded breeding at Jebel Qahar near Rakhiya in March 1996; six old nests were also found in the nearby Juniper forests. Since they were already feeding the nestlings on March 7-9, it is certain that the breeding started sometime in February.

The nest of Asir magpie is a huge, rather oval, global, mass of loosely arranged dry twigs placed at the base of forked branches about 5-6 m above the ground. So far, all nests found by the present survey at Jebel Qahar and at Jebel Soodah have been recorded on juniper trees. (However acacia has also been recorded as the nest tree by others). The entrance of the nest is on the side. It is generally lined with soft materials such as rootlets, feathers and measures approximately 50 cm x 60 cm.

Parents start feeding the nestlings with food gathered nearby from very early in the morning and frequently feed throughout the day. However, maximum activity by both parents (average eight visits per hour) were recorded during the morning. While approaching and leaving the nest, and foraging around, the parents call loudly. While feeding the nestlings, they approach the nest very cautiously; perch on nearby branches carefully, look around and then enter. Since there was no call/sound heard from the nest and parents were recorded feeding soft grubs (caterpillars) picked up from the ground, we presume that the nestlings were only 3-4 days old. (Grown up nestlings of most crows usually make a loud food begging call whilst receiving/soliciting food).

Conclusion

Habitat loss appears to be the main reason for the apparent decline in the population of the Asir Magpie. This is mainly on account of rapid developments in promoting tourism. Natural habitats in the Asir are shrinking alarmingly and it is no exaggeration to say that the biodiversity of the Asir Region is at stake. The restoration of the natural habitat should be the main objective of any nature conservation programme in this region. A long term project to study the ecology and biology of Asir magpie will also be initiated without further delay.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to Prof. A. H. Abuzinada, Secretary General of NCWCD and Yousef al Wutaid, Director of Research and Field Studies for encouragement and facilities; and to Mr Ali al Asiri, Range Officer Raydah Reserve and his staff members for providing local hospitality.

H.S.A. Yahya and M. Salamah NCWCD, PO Box 61681, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

Reintroduction of Houbara Bustards into Central Saudi Arabia: A Summary of Results Between 1991 and 1996

A patchwork of sightings by the first European explorers to Saudi Arabia combine with local oral records to suggest that the Kingdom once had healthy and widely dispersed breeding populations of the houbara bustard *Chlamydotis macqueenii*. These year-round residents were joined each winter by an influx of migrant houbara, moving down through the Arabian Peninsula from northern breeding grounds, perhaps as far away as Kazakhstan. Hunting, with falcon and shotgun, encroachment into once remote areas, and loss of steppe desert habitat to agriculture has markedly reduced houbara numbers in Saudi Arabia. But whereas migrant houbara were able to



Fig 10 Houbara *Chlamydotis undulata/macqueenii* bred as a reintroduced species in the central Arabia at the Mahazat as-Sayd reserve in 1995.

retreat to the relative safety of their breeding grounds, resident houbara were exposed to hunting throughout the year. Consequently, Saudi Arabia's resident houbara have been reduced to a single breeding population persisting at low density within the Harrat al-Harrah protected area in the far north.

Since 1986 one of the core projects of the NCWCD has been an attempt to restore resident houbara numbers through captive-breeding and reintroduction into suitable protected areas. The NCWCD houbara reintroduction project is based at the National Wildlife Research Centre (NWRC) in Taif. Since 1991 releases of captive-bred houbara, offspring of founders bred at the NWRC, have been released into the 2,200 km² Mahazat as-Sayd reserve (c.a. 1A21). Situated 150 km north east of Taif, Mahazat as-Sayd is the largest fenced reserve in Saudi Arabia and is the site of the first reintroductions of Arabian oryx *Oryx leucoryx*, sand gazelle *Gazella subgutturosa* and the red-necked ostrich *Struthio camelus camelus*.

Between 1991 and 1993 houbara research staff in Mahazat as-Sayd tried different release methods to maximise the post-release survival. By 1994 the researcher then in charge of releases, Dr Olivier Combreau, determined that sub-adult birds showed the highest survival after release and that subsequent

trials should concentrate on birds of this age. Between 1994 and 1996 only sub-adult houbara aged about two to four months have been released. Houbara are transported to Mahazat as-Sayd and placed in soft-netting cages for several weeks before being released into a 400 ha mammalian predator-proof enclosure. The birds are free to fly out of this enclosure and into the wider reserve at any time after release and most do so within one month.

Between 1991 and 1995 a total of 135 houbara have been released into Mahazat as-Sayd. All the released birds are fitted with backpack mounted, solar-powered radio-transmitters. This enables field workers to locate the birds, and to monitor survival, dispersal, habitat use and behaviour. By 31 December 1995 41 houbara could be located within the reserve, with another 11 missing but possibly alive but with faulty transmitters. An overall survival rate of between 30 and 40% is encouraging, particularly since this includes the relatively high rate of losses incurred during early trials with chicks and non-flighted birds.

The population now includes birds which are up to three years old and potentially able to breed. During spring therefore, attention has been focused on locating evidence of breeding within the newly established population. This effort was rewarded with the discovery in April 1995 of the first egg ever laid by a reintroduced houbara, and the first breeding by houbara in central Saudi Arabia for at least 40 years. A total of three nests were found during 1995, producing four chicks, making Mahazat as-Sayd a new dot on the map of breeding sites for the houbara in the Arabian Peninsula.

In December 1995 frequent location of the radio-tagged males in the population resulted in the location of 11 individual display sites. One location held up to five displaying males all within about 1 km². The Mahazat as-Sayd houbara population is unique in that all the birds are aged, sexed and tagged, and their individual movements may be monitored closely. This allows field researchers to begin to answer some of the questions we have about houbara behaviour in the wild, one of the most fundamental of which concerns their breeding system. The houbara has been variously described as monogamous, polygynous or promiscuous. The data from the released population has indicated that houbara, in Mahazat as-Sayd at least, are promiscuous, with mating and mate choice centred on male dominance type exploded leks. Work in late 1996 hopes to investigate some of the factors influencing the formation of these dispersed lek sites.

But the problems of taking captive-bred houbara and placing them in the wild are far from solved. Houbara are not like Arabian oryx or gazelle, the houbara has natural predators such as the red fox *Vulpes vulpes* and wild cat *Felix silvestris*, which will take quick advantage of any bird that appears vulnerable or unwary. By far the greatest cause of post-release mortality is predation by mammalian carnivores, with losses reaching 50% or more. Two approaches have been taken during recent releases to try and reduce predation. Firstly, the area round the release site is trapped for small carnivores, and all red foxes and wild cats are translocated out of the reserve to try and reduce the density of predators in the immediate vicinity, and thereby increase the amount of time available to the houbara to

familiarise themselves with their new environment. A more active approach is also being tried; during the 1995 and 1996 releases birds have been actively trained to increase their recognition of predators through the use of both model and live red foxes. The effect of training is currently being assessed through behavioural testing before release and by post-release survival.

Although approximately 50% of released houbara learn to avoid predators and survive within Mahazar as-Sayd, the problems with predators does not end there. Results from spring 1996 have shown that predation of eggs at nests may be significant, with three out of four of the 1996 nesting attempts ending in egg loss to an unknown predator. Before any management can be formulated to try and reduce these losses it is important to identify both the predator involved and the circumstances under which predation takes place. It is therefore planned to have 24-hour video monitoring of any nests located in 1997. Video monitoring will also provide information on patterns of nest attendance by incubating females.

The 1996 release season is currently underway. Between 40 and 50 sub-adult houbara will be released into the reserve by September 1996. As with previous releases, all the birds will be radio-tagged. We are encouraged by the results so far, a reasonable percentage of released birds have survived and remained in the reserve to create a resident breeding population. The ultimate goal however, is to create a self-sustaining population of houbara in Mahazat as-Sayd, and to repeat this process in other protected areas and thereby restore the houbara bustard to the central and eastern parts of Saudi Arabia.

Philip J Seddon & Richard F Maloney, National Wildlife Research Centre NCWCD, PO Box 1086, Taif, Saudi Arabia.

Journals, Reports and Other Publications

The following notes list some of the more interesting papers concerning birds and other wildlife which have appeared in the various Arabian natural history newsletters and in other reports etc in recent months. Space does not permit the full citation of each article but further information can be obtained from the various societies and organisations shown. Note that in addition to the main papers listed most periodicals also include regular features such as recent reports, brief notes etc.

Fauna of Saudi Arabia Vol 15 (1996)

The latest volume of this important series sees a change of editors. Professor William Büttiker, the founding editor has moved over for the new editors Dr Freidhelm Krupp and Volker Mahnert both of whom have been closely associated with the series for some time. The single bird article in this volume presents information on four major wadi systems in south-west Saudi Arabia. 142 species are mentioned and notes are given of their commonality and status at each site. Other papers in this volume cover arachnids (two), crustaceans (three), centipedes (one), insects (eight), echinoderms (one) and fish (two). The above include important papers covering the 265 species of ants to be found in Arabia and a new species of shark described from the Arabian Gulf. Colour pictures included are of beetles, crabs, fish and habitats. *Hard back, 418 pages (285mm x 215*

mm) price Sfr 159. Published by the NCWCD PO Box 61681, Riyadh and Pro-Entomologica c/o Natural History Museum, Basle, Switzerland.

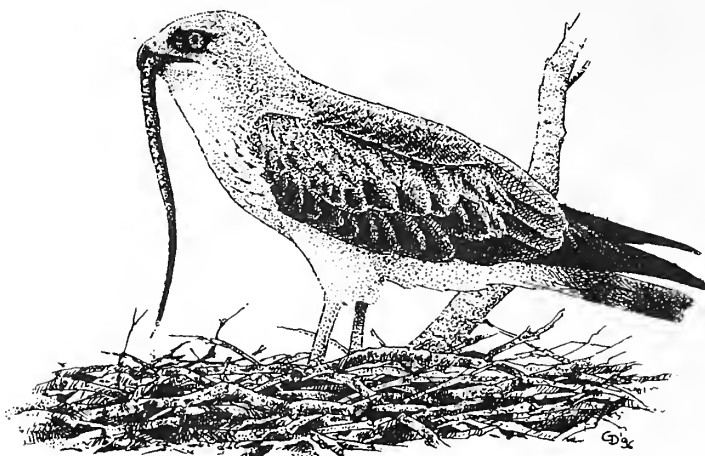


Fig 11 Breeding was proven for short-toed eagle *Circaetus gallicus* in central Arabia during ABBA Survey 19, April 1996.

Oman Bird News: Nos 18 and 19 (Winter 1995/96 and Summer 1996)

Number 18 of OBN appeared in early 1996 a year after No 17. Articles concern the diet of the pale crag martin (mostly beetles and ants), the number of red-necked phalaropes wintering in the Arabian sea (a five figure population is postulated in the Muscat area); rare birds in Oman in the last couple of years; the occurrence of the houbara in Oman and further information on Jouanin's petrel. There are two notes on Dhofar including one very useful account on how to get there, accommodation, places to visit etc. Number 18 had 25 pages, number 19 (Summer 1996) was smaller at 15 pages but contained the exciting details of breeding collared pratincole near Sohar (eggs and young). News also of waterfowl counts and ringed birds. *Both available from the Oman Bird Records Committee, PO Box 246, Muscat 113, Sultanate of Oman.*

Tribulus

Vol 5, Pt 2 (Oct 95), contained eight main articles, covering cetacean research, dugongs, turtles, tiger beetles, butterflies, mammals of the UAE highlands and the protection of the Socotra cormorant. There were six papers in Vol 6. Pt 1 (Apr 96), on protected areas, a checklist of amphibians and reptiles, a list of mammals and their conservation status, mountain gazelles, houbara and a botany excursion.

Sandgrouse Vols 17 and 18(Pt 1)

Vol 17 is a 188 page, single issue which will be regarded as a milestone for OSME. Not only is it the report of the second OSME expedition to Yemen but it is also the last volume of Sandgrouse in the old format. Volume 18 (see below) is a different size and includes regular items that previously appeared in the OSME bulletin. OSME's second expedition to

Yemen was for a duration of eight weeks to what used to be known as South Yemen (some now say eastern Yemen) and Socotra. A week was spent on Socotra. The report of the expedition comprises a total of 23 separate papers, including four general ones, two checklists (of passerines and non-passerines) of eastern Yemen and Socotra. A dozen papers relate to single species including ten on Socotran specialties and endemics. Finally there are five on non-ornithological fauna, including mammals, reptiles, amphibians and dragonflies. Future ornithologists travelling to eastern Yemen and Socotra will need this volume. *Sandgrouse* 18 (Pt 1) heralds the new look OSME journal. It is a bit more flash, with more pictures, artwork and colour and a more reader-friendly format. Slightly bigger in format than the old issues at 165 mm x 245 mm. It has a glossy wrap around card cover and this issue has 80 pages. The new look *Sandgrouse* incorporates the old *OSME Bulletin* and aims to appear twice a year. It includes a number of regular articles previously in the newsletters, such as *News and Information* and *Around the Region*. The main papers in this issue concern the birds of Thumamah, central Arabia, coastal birds of Libya and raptors at Jebel Zeit, Egypt, whilst species closeups focus on long-billed pipit, oriental pratincole, the first Saudi Arabian woodlark, among others.

Akamas Cyprus: A report on bird migration, Spring 1995 by A R Brimmell, P E & V S A Cozens & R Frost (1996)

The Akamas peninsula sits at the westernmost point of Cyprus. It is an area of outstanding natural beauty and holds much of interest for birdwatchers and botanists. In Spring 1995 a group

of RAF Ornithological Society members surveyed this remote corner of Cyprus for six weeks, the first ever ornithological survey of this important area. The report covers details of the 140 species recorded, information of the 3500 birds of 65 species which were ringed, details of reports made to the Cyprus Breeding Bird Atlas (20 species were confirmed breeding) and various transect counts. There are detailed notes on sedge warblers, Sardinian warblers, black cap, black and white flycatchers and woodchat shrike. Illustrated by line drawings and eight colour plates of sites and birds. There are also notes on weather and butterflies (17 species recorded). *Card cover, 80 pages (A5). Price £5 available from Vic Cozens, 9 Dendys, Hemingford Grey, Huntingdon, Cambs PE18 9EU, UK. Cheques to be made payable to "AKAMAS 95". All profits on the sale of this report will go to the Cyprus Conservation Foundation.*

Report of ospreys in the Farasan Islands, 1994-96

The Farasan Islands off Jizan are thought to hold the highest concentration of ospreys in the Red Sea. Paul Fisher of Manchester Metropolitan University has produced this further report (August 1996, pp 57) for the NCWCD of research spanning the breeding seasons 1994-96. The study has investigated breeding chronology, chick growth, sibling dominance, food provisioning rates and diet composition. The average fledglings per breeding attempt has been 1.3 over the period. There were 126 occupied territories in 1996 and 140 nestlings have been ringed over the last two seasons. *Enquiries to P. R. Fisher, Conservation Biology Research Group, MMU, Chester Street, Manchester, M1 5GD, England.*

PHOENIX SUBSCRIPTION AND ABBA SALES ITEMS: ORDER FORM

1. **Phoenix Subscription** Please enrol me for the next five issues of *Phoenix* (Nos 14 - 18) at a total cost of £20 (See notes on over the page)

Sum enclosed

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2. **Phoenix back issues** (Nos. 1-12) £2 each
State issues required)

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3. **Phoenix**, set of issues 1-12, for £15.

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4. **ABBA Survey Reports** (£12 each)

- a. Asir National Park Saudi Arabia (pp 76)
- b. Northern Saudi Arabia (pp 65)
- c. Northern Asir and southern Hedjaz Saudi Arabia (pp 65)
- d. Central and north western Saudi Arabia (pp 82)
- e. Southern Yemen (pp 64)
- f. Central Saudi Arabia (pp 60)
- g. UAE, Oman and northern Saudi Arabia (pp 71)

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5. **Atlas Arabians Birds** A collection of 19 summary reports on the ABBA surveys which have reached every corner of Arabia; includes notes on birds seen, other wildlife, places, topography and maps (pp 117) £15.

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(Cut out or photocopy and send to address overleaf)

TOTAL ENCLOSED

.....

This issue contains 17 articles, seven of which concern invertebrates, including one describing a scorpion new to science from Iran. Of the ten vertebrate papers five concern birds, two mammals, two reptiles and one fish. The bird papers cover hawfinch and red-fronted serin new to Arabia and a very important paper on the ecology and behaviour of the Arabian woodpecker. The non-Arabian bird papers deal with winter observations from Sinai and a breeding record (first for 20 years) of imperial eagle in Turkey. Card cover 117 pages A5 size. Available from Max Kasperek Verlag, Bleichstr 1, 69120 Heidelberg, Germany. Price 27 DM.

Arabian Wildlife

Vol 2, No 3 (1995/1996) continues with lots of very attractive pictures as we have become accustomed to in this glossy and very readable magazine. There is plenty of bird news in this issue with two notes on the Socotra cormorant and some amazing photos, information on the reintroduction of the houbara to central Arabia, birds of prey in Southern Arabia and Asir mountain birds. Other articles deal with a Yemen leopard in captivity, flowers of the south-west of Saudi Arabia, desert rodents and Arabian spiders. Marine interest is also high with reports on silky sharks, a giant nudibranch from the Red Sea, diving off Jana island in the Arabian Gulf and cetacean research in the UAE.

New Periodicals

The Lammergeier

The Yemen Ornithological Society has introduced a new style (almost) monthly newsletter known as *the Lammergeier*, which is circulated to notify recent records to birding people inside and outside of Yemen. The first issues have included articles on endemics, Socotra's birds, exotics, sites, noteworthy records and identification. *Membership of the Yemen Ornithological Society is available to all, the annual subscription is \$20 US. Details of membership are available from the Secretary, David B Stanton, Yemen Ornithological Society, PO Box 2002, Sana'a, Republic of Yemen. Telephone number 9671248309, fax 9671234438. (Email david.s@netqsi.com)*

Risala

This newsletter is for IUCN members of North Africa, and the western and central Asian region. The need for a local newsletter arose from the Regional IUCN meeting held October 1995, in Riyadh. Issues 1 and 2 (sponsored by NCWCD Riyadh), appeared in November 1995 and March 1996, but there are no plans to produce newsletters to a set periodicity. The two four page (A4) issues so far have included articles on the papers presented at the October 95 meeting, focusing on reserves and sites, individuals active in IUCN and Conservation in the region, other news and book reviews. Available from the NCWCD PO Box 61681, Riyadh 11575, Saudi Arabia.

Notes to Phoenix Subscriptions and ABBA sales items

1. All items are post free. If airmail is desired please add 25% to total cost.
2. If payment is preferred in a foreign currency please send bank notes (at current rate of exchange). Unfortunately bank charges on foreign currency cheques are now so exorbitant as to make payment by foreign cheque unrealistic for small sums.
3. Current subscribers to *Phoenix* will receive a personal reminder when their next subscription is due.
4. Cheques to be made payable to "M C Jennings" or "ABBA" (or credit Giro Account No 50 851 7206). Cheques to be sent to:

Michael C Jennings, Coordinator Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Arabia, I Warners Farm, Warners Drove, Somersham, Cambridgeshire, PE17 3HW, England

Name and address for despatch of sales items:

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ABBA and *Phoenix* Notes and Notices

Records still needed

Readers who have records of Arabian birds, however old, and whether published or not, are urged to make contact with the Co-ordinator. Old records are especially valuable in assessing population changes and range expansions and contractions. For example were there house sparrows *Passer domesticus* in Abu Dhabi in 1960? No one seems to know for sure. Although the project concerns resident and breeding species, it is not only proved breeding information that is required, notes suggesting possible or probable breeding, particularly unusual breeding species, are also very valuable. Information on exotics and escaped species, ringed birds and habitats is also needed.

There is still much scope for collecting breeding bird information even for the common species in well trodden areas. Would observers please continue to send in records and information for their local area and remember to copy ABBA report sheets to the local bird recorder (if there is one). Any outstanding report sheets for 1996 should be sent in as soon as possible.

All potential contributors will be sent full instructions on how to submit records, ABBA recording forms, breeding birds list etc.

How to obtain *Phoenix*

One issue of *Phoenix* is published each year. It is issued free to all current contributors to the ABBA project and is sent to recent correspondents. A bundle of each issue is also passed to all natural history and similar groups active in Arabia. It is also available on subscription for a single payment of £20 for the next five issues, i.e. Nos 14 to 18 inclusive. Because of the unrealistic bank charges for handling foreign cheques those not having access to a UK bank account are asked to pay in sterling notes or the equivalent in foreign currency notes. *Phoenix* Nos 1-12 are available at £2 each (or the set for £15) including postage. Those leaving Arabia might be interested in placing a subscription order as the price represents a small sum for all the news of Arabian birds for five years. Will subscribers and observers please remember to advise any change of address. All subscribers will receive a reminder when their next subscription is due.

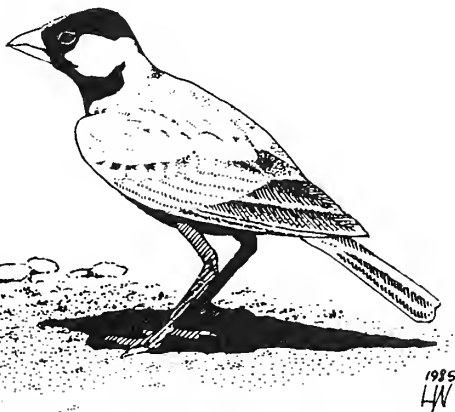


Fig 12 Black-crowned finch *Eremopterix nigriceps* were confirmed breeding in the desert of north east Kuwait (NB36) in 1996, the first breeding in Kuwait since 1979 (CWT Pilcher).

Photos needed for *Phoenix*

Photos of Arabian breeding birds, their nests, eggs and habitats etc are welcomed for inclusion in future issues of *Phoenix*. Photos may be printed with just a caption, for their aesthetic value; or can be submitted to illustrate notes and papers. Submitted photos may be in colour or black and white (glossy or matt), slides, prints or negatives, so long as they have good contrast.

Contributions to *Phoenix*

Articles relevant to the aims of the ABBA project are welcomed, especially notes on new breeding birds, the avifauna of specific areas or studies concerning particular species. There is no charge for notices, requests for information and advertisements of reports, publications etc. Submissions need not necessarily be typed. Charges for commercial advertisements and loose inserts are available on request.

The *Phoenix*

This newsletter is covered by the Biosciences Information Service (BIOSIS) of the Zoological Record. Articles and information in *Phoenix* may be freely reproduced for scientific or non-profit making purposes, provided appropriate acknowledgement is given to authors, the ABBA project and its NCWCD sponsors. Views expressed by authors, including the position of international boundaries on maps or reference to same in the text, do not necessarily reflect those of the Editor or the project sponsors.

ABBA Survey Reports and Summaries

To date, 19 ABBA Surveys have been completed, they have reached almost every part of Arabia from the Gulf of Aqaba to Ras al Hadd in Oman and the Kuwait border to Aden. For each survey a summary report is prepared which includes the itinerary, a map and details of unusual observations etc. This is followed later by a full report prepared for the NCWCD, providing all the information collected on bird distribution and numbers. In line with the ABBA policy of making all information collected by the project available to those who want to use it, the summaries and full reports are copied to relevant libraries, museums and societies. In addition, a small number are available for sale. Full reports of Surveys Nos 4 to 16, and summaries of all 19 are currently available. (See details on the sales list at page 17).

ABBA on the Internet

Just before going to press ABBA got connected to the Internet. ABBA's Email address is "arabian.birds@dial.pipex.com". There are plans to have news, information and reports etc on WWW pages along with basic information about the project, including instructions for contributors, report forms, etc. Connected observers will find it easier and cheaper than ever to send in ABBA records as well as copies of their reports, articles for *Phoenix* etc. Please Email ABBA so you can be added to the Email distribution list for survey summaries, reports, recent breeding bird records and other news.

Lappet-faced Vultures in Saudi Arabia

The following is the summary of a paper in *Ibis* 138:675-685 (1996) by Stephen & Anne Newton (formerly of the NWRC Taif) on the breeding biology and seasonal abundance of the lappet-faced vultures in western Saudi Arabia.

"Lappet-faced vultures *Torgos tracheliotus* utilizing a 2200-km², fenced, protected area in western Saudi Arabia were studied over 4 years. Numbers fluctuated seasonally from minima of c. 30 individuals in the spring to maxima of 160 birds in the autumn. All birds foraged predominantly on domestic livestock carrion outside the Reserve. In each year, up to 17 pairs attempted to breed, with 81% of the eggs hatched and 85% of nestlings fledged. Most eggs were laid in December, when mean daily air temperatures were lowest, and young usually fledged c. 180 days later. Overall, 56% of nesting attempts fledged young. Juvenile mortality over the first three months after fledging was at least 17%. The numbers and proportion of breeders appeared to be stable, but it is not known whether the establishment of the Reserve concentrated the nesting and roosting of vultures in the area or has attracted birds from elsewhere. Breeding success was higher than in most well-studied African populations and probably those nesting elsewhere in Arabia. Four pairs reared 52% of the fledglings observed in the Reserve over 4 years. The Saudi Arabian Lappet-faced vultures probably belong to the subspecies *negevensis* and, because of the extinction of this subspecies in the wild in Israel, the well-being of the Saudi Arabian population is critical to the subspecies' conservation."

Announcements and Requests for Information

OSME 1997 AGM

The next Ornithological Society of the Middle East Summer Meeting and Eighteenth Annual General Meeting will take place on Saturday 12 July 1997. The location will be the School of Oriental and African Studies, near Russell Square, London (same venue as in 1996). Further details to be announced in the Spring of 1997 by OSME.

Barbary falcon

Dieter Schmidl is preparing a book on the red-naped shahin, *Falco peregrinus babylonicus* or Barbary falcon *Falco peregrinoides* as known to ABBA. Information is sought on the following:

- literature mentioning this falcon, e.g. handbooks, checklists, expedition reports;
- published or unpublished manuscripts of observers including breeding records;
- addresses of institutions or persons also engaged in the study of this falcon, location of museum skin collections (data of skins will be very useful), current or recent research, field observations, falconry, captive breeding etc.

All information received will be acknowledged. Please send records to Dieter Schmidl, Max-Planck-Institut, D-82319 Seewiesen, Germany.

Socotra: a bibliography; from 1800 to the present

I have been compiling a bibliography of the archipelago of Socotra since 1956 when I visited the island of Socotra. This bibliography now numbers well over 1,000 carefully checked references and there are several hundred more still to be verified.

The bibliography covers both published and unpublished references and includes all aspects of Socotra and its environment including history, people, botany, zoology, ecology, geology, meteorology and marine surroundings. The bibliography is not limited to learned documents but includes popular magazine articles and more general accounts of visits made; there is even a short article from Punch. There is also an additional section on maps and charts, including some unpublished drafts.

There is increasing international interest in the conservation of the unique flora of Socotra, its endemic animals and the interesting marine life of the adjacent waters. This external interest coincides with growing awareness by the Government of the Yemen of the need for greatly improved economic development of Socotra and its resources. Thus there is a new and expanding requirement for information about both the island and the archipelago. Consequently, increased interest is being shown in the *Socotra Bibliography* as a source through which reliable information may be sought.

I am, therefore, seeking information from readers of *The Phoenix* about lesser known or unpublished reports and articles relating to birds on Socotra that they might have written, or about which they might know. I am particularly interested in any records made of birds and other animals, especially bird lists, that may have been made by visitors to the islands. A great deal of interesting and valuable information is gathered in the field that never finds its way into the publications arising from such field work. I am anxious that this type of information about Socotra is not lost which is why I would particularly like to hear about unpublished works, including diaries, so that they may be documented and included in the bibliography. I am also interested in papers and reports produced by Soviet scientists and other academics during the long postwar presence of the USSR on Socotra. I would welcome suggestions for people to contact.

All assistance will be fully acknowledged when the final version of the bibliography is published.

Dr M. D. Gwynne, PO Box 24529, Nairobi, Kenya; Fax/phone (254)-(2)-882370.

Arabian Database of marked birds

For many years I have collected information on ringed birds (including colour ringed), as well as birds that have been marked and tracked in some other way, such as being fitted with a radio or satellite transmitters. These records will

eventually be worked up into a report on the movement of marked birds in, to and from Arabia. It would be appreciated if readers learning of recent records of marked birds would send details to be included on the database, including press cuttings, etc. The record does not have to be complete, a report of an unidentified gull found on a beach with a Moscow ring on it, mentioned in a newspaper would be useful as it may help to piece together other snippets of information.

MCJ

Help needed on the final atlas

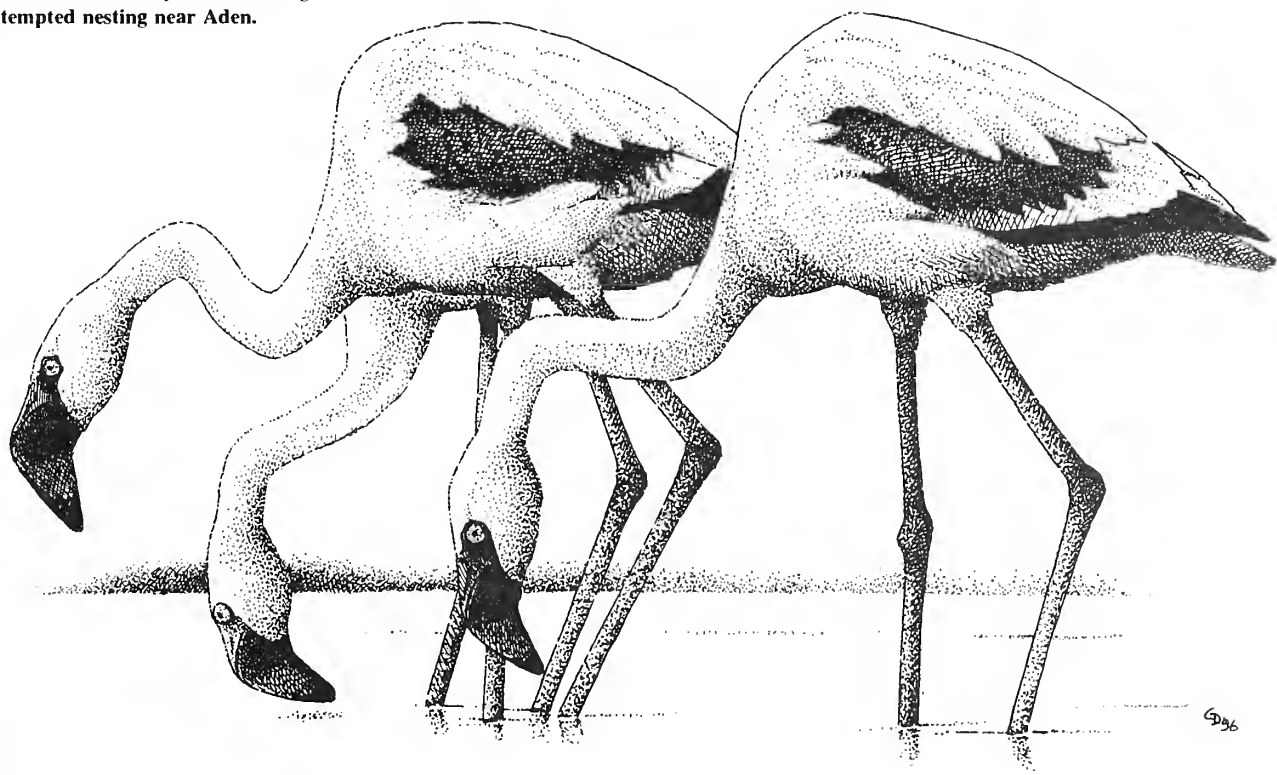
As work progresses on the final atlas two areas have been identified where assistance is needed;

Species world maps and general maps: In addition to the map(s) showing species distribution in Arabia each species account will be supported by a small map identifying the world range. There is also a need for a number of general maps, e.g. of relief, climate, etc, for the introductory chapters. If any *Phoenix* reader has the skills/tools necessary to prepare such maps and would like to help they should make contact.

Literature Survey: This part of the data collection programme is lagging behind but needs to be completed by the end of 1997 at the latest. It may be necessary to recruit further help. Work involves going through published and unpublished sources and extracting records in the ABBA database format.

Assistance on both jobs would be on a paid basis from ABBA sponsorship funds.

Fig 13 Unprecedented numbers of lesser flamingo *Phoenicopaterus minor* have been recorded in southern Oman and Yemen in the last two years, including an attempted nesting near Aden.



Griffon vulture nests

Page 44 of the *Interim Atlas* erroneously states that the nest of the griffon vulture *Gyps fulvus* is "...an unlined scrape in the rock dust of a cliff ledge.....". It should have read "the nest is small, constructed of twigs and lined with finer material and placed on a cliff ledge or crevice, usually with an overhang. Thanks to Peter Mundy for drawing attention to this.

Summary Report of ABBA Survey 19 to South Central Saudi Arabia; March and April 1996

The objective of ABBA Survey 19 was to visit unrecorded and poorly recorded atlas squares in the south central region of Saudi Arabia. The survey area included the granite jebels on the extreme eastern edge of the Arabian shield (which lie between the Taif to Riyadh highway and Wadi Dawasir) and the sandstone jebels between Wadi Dawasir and Najran. The latter region is known collectively as the Wajid sandstones.

The main survey commenced on 17 March at Jebel Ibn Huwail (KB22), which at 1500 m is the highest point in Nejd. From there I moved south through the granite jebels to Khamasin (LA17). South from Khamasin I visited the northern and eastern parts of the Wajid sandstones, exiting east to the al Arid escarpment and the Bani Ma'arid Wildlife Reserve (ca LA15). One day was spent at the reserve before travelling on to Sharawrah in the centre of the southern sector of the Empty Quarter. (See separate note on Sharawrah birds in this issue). After Sharawrah I drove westwards along the highway to

Najran before re-entering the Wajid sandstones from the south.

Unfortunately I experienced mechanical problems with my vehicle at Sharawrah and again at Najran. The vehicle was repaired and new parts fitted at Najran but on 28 March, in the centre of the Wajid sandstone it broke down again. The breakdown occurred 100 km off the road, several kms up a very difficult wadi disturbed by recent floods. The breakdown was not life threatening as fortunately the only village in the whole area (four houses and a school) was just eight kilometres away, and in any event there were many bedouin in the region at the time. However the event lost me six days field work as I had to fetch a heavy recovery vehicle from Riyadh, 800 kms away, to retrieve the vehicle and return it to Riyadh. This was the only serious breakdown I have experienced in the 19 ABBA

survey from Riyadh, with another vehicle. This final part of the survey examined the northern part of the granite jebels from LB25 on the Taif - Riyadh highway to 200 km south, returning in a wide loop.

In all some 50 squares were visited, including nine squares for which no ABBA records were held. A total of 43 potential breeding birds were recorded in the main area of the survey of which 19 were proven to breed and a further 11 were probably breeding at the time. The survey followed a period of very good rain throughout central Arabia and as a result many of the areas visited were richly carpeted in grasses, herbs and ephemeral plants. As a result there were many bedouin and their herds in the desert. In addition to potential breeding species some 65 purely migratory species were recorded, most of these on a short visit to the al Hair river and lagoons south of Riyadh on 16 March.

Selected notes and dates of some of the species observed and an indication of breeding evidence, are shown below. Fossilised eggshell fragments of the extinct Arabian ostrich *Struthio camelus* were found in sand dunes at Bani Ma'arid.

Cattle egret *Bubulcus ibis*

Seven al Hair dam, 16 March and 36 Sharawrah rubbish tip, 25 March.

Gadwall *Anas strepera*

Nine al Hair dam, 16 March.

Egyptian vulture *Neophron percnopterus*

Rather scarce but widespread in both the granite and sandstone jebels. Not recorded Sharawrah, Bani Ma'arid, or Najran. Adults seen to leave nests 19 March.

Lappet-faced vulture *Torgos tracheliotos*

Rather scarce, two observations in the granite jebels, one in the sandstones. A pair at a nest with a large nestling on the al Arid escarpment 23 March.

Short-toed eagle *Circus gallicus*

The only bird observed flew from a nest containing one egg in an acacia tree at Jebel Rasan, 5 April. This is thought to be the third confirmed breeding record for Arabia.

Osprey *Pandion haliaetus*

One plunge fishing al Hair dam, 16 March.

Arabian red-legged partridge *Alectoris melanocyphala*

Heard and briefly glimpsed Jebel Wajid (KA13), 27 March. A range extension for this endemic species.

Houbara *Chlamydotis undulata*

One adult (probable male), on the Tuwaiq Escarpment backslope within the Bani Ma'arid Reserve, 29 March. Tracks followed over a considerable distance indicated a single bird moving around feeding.

African collared dove *Streptopelia roseogrisea*

Widespread in the Jebel Wajid sandstone area and south of Najran. Several records where not previously recorded.

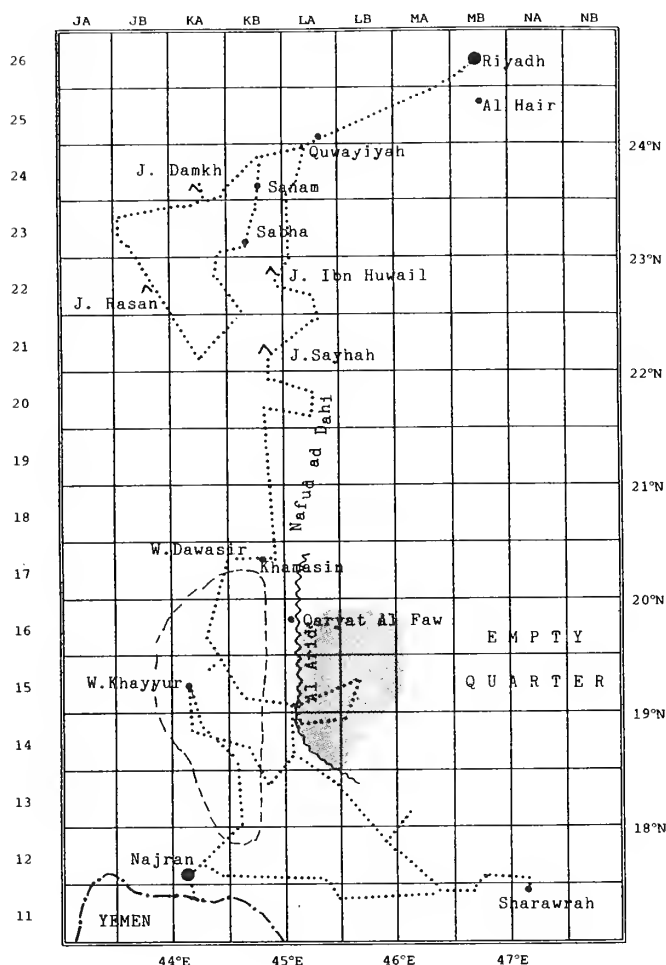


Fig 14 ABBA Survey No. 19 to south central Saudi Arabia, March - April 1996. Route taken shown as a dotted line (vehicle recovery routes not shown). The dashed line is the limit of the Wajid Sandstones and the shaded area is the Bani Ma'arid Reserve.

surveys so far. The experience served to remind me how important it is to always have sufficient food and water supplies and effective survival equipment with you in the desert and to know precisely where you are and where to find assistance. Crucially important when you are on your own as I was.

The lost days meant that a number of squares in south central Arabia that had not been atlased before could not be visited as originally planned. It was 3 April before I could restart the

Eurasian collared dove *Streptopelia decaocto*

This dove occurs in the granite jebels north of Khamasin but not at all in the sandstones south of that town. A few at Qaryat al Faw but absent from Sharawrah. Nestlings on 3 April.

Palm dove *Streptopelia senegalensis*

Occurs around Riyadh and near Khamasin, also common Sharawrah and south of Najran. Local in the Wajid sandstones.

Plain nightjar *Caprimulgus inornatus*

One heard Wajid sandstones, 27 March.

Eagle owl *Bubo bubo*

Widespread, heard at at least six localities, on one occasion calling at midday and another in the middle of the afternoon.

Dunn's lark *Eremalauda dunni*

Widespread in small numbers in the granite and sandstone areas and also Bani Ma'arid Reserve. On one occasion observed to eat a grasshopper. Nest building and carrying food for young in early April. (See also *Alaemon alaudipes*).

Bar-tailed desert lark *Ammomanes cincturus*

Widespread in both the granite and sandstone areas, although much restricted in the latter, never common. Also Bani Ma'arid Reserve. Nest with eggs 20 March and fledged juveniles 3 April. (See also *Alaemon alaudipes*).

Hoopoe lark *Alaemon alaudipes*

Widespread but rather scarce. More common in the deserts of the northern granites, also relatively common Bani Ma'arid Reserve. On one occasion singing at 0345 hrs. with a full moon (sunrise at 0551 hrs.). Nest building on 23 March. In this exceptional year of much vegetation it was noticed on several occasions that this species, along with *Eremopterix nigriceps*, *Eremalauda dunni* and *Ammomanes cincturus*, was generally absent from large areas of apparently suitable habitat with profuse covering of grasses. However all four species were present, often in high concentrations, in areas where grasses were mixed with a variety of herbs and other plants.

Black bushchat *Cercotrichas podobe*

Two Khamasin, 21 March, common near Najran 25 - 26 March, and two in the western Wajid sandstones area, 27 March.

White-throated robin *Irania gutturalis*

One (singing) KB20, 20 March and three others 3-4 April.

Mourning wheatear *Oenanthe lugens*

One in the Wajid sandstones (KA16), 22 March resembled birds found in the sandstones of north-west Arabia rather than *lugentoides* of the south-west. On 27 & 28 March four in the Wajid sandstones were very well marked (black and white) and appeared to be of the race *persicus* but the dates are late for wintering birds.

Hooded wheatear *Oenanthe monacha*

One Jebel Sayhah, 19 March also and recorded at four localities (3 pairs) Wajid sandstones 26 and 27 March.

White-crowned black wheatear *Oenanthe leucopyga*

Scarce but widespread throughout both the granite and

sandstone jebels. Food begging young on 26 March.

Great reed warbler *Acrocephalus arundinaceus*

One in isolated bush in sand dunes, Bani Ma'arid, 23 March.

Ménétries's warbler *Sylvia mystacea*

One (in sub-song) KA21, 4 April.

Nile valley sunbird *Anthreptes metallicus*

Common around Najran but also two sites in western parts of the Wajid sandstones (KA15), a small eastward range extension.

Shining sunbird *Nectarinia habessinica*

A few near Najran but also recorded in the western part of the Wajid sandstones (KA13), which represents a small range extension for the species. Nest building Jebel Wajid 27 March.

Fan-tailed raven *Corvus rhipidurus*

Observed Ibn Huwail and Jebel Sayhah. Jebel Damkh and the Wajid sandstones (several atlas squares where not previously known to occur). Adult at probable nest site 6 April.

House sparrow *Passer domesticus*

Widespread although scarce and very local away from human habitations. Widespread breeding activity at settlements but has not yet reached Sharawrah.

Pale rock sparrow *Petronia brachydactyla*

Widespread in small numbers and singing in the northern granite areas. Also singing Tuwaiq, west of Riyadh, 6 April.

I would like to record my thanks for the continuing support of the ABBA project by the NCWCD and its Secretary General Professor Abdulaziz Abuzinada and especially for sponsoring this survey. Also I acknowledge the kindness, help and hospitality extended to me by Rashid Abdulhadi al Murri the Chief Ranger at the Bani Ma'arid Wildlife Reserve and Mohammad Fawaz al Baroudi and Martin Strauss on the Reserve staff who kindly showed me many places within the Reserve. My thanks go to Khalid Ahmed Bahamman, Head of the NCWCD Service Department and Mohammed Feisal al Dausari, the recovery vehicle driver, for their help, patience and hospitality in extracting my broken down vehicle from the Wajid sandstones and returning it and myself safely to Riyadh.

MCI

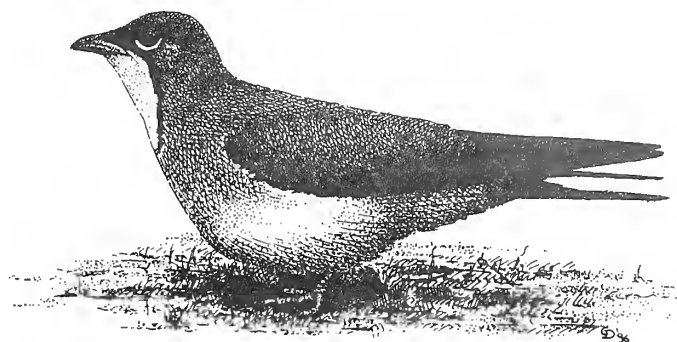


Fig 15 An additional breeding bird for Oman in 1996 was the pratincole *Glareola pratincola*.

Bonelli's Eagle Breeds in the Riyadh Suburbs

Wadi Nimar (MB26) lies to the s.w. of Riyadh. It is a canyon wadi that cuts through the limestone of the eastern backslope of the Tuwaiq Escarpment and runs generally eastwards to join the Wadi Hanifah, some 6 km from the centre of Riyadh. There are several pools in the wadi and a large lagoon some 2-300 m wide formed behind a 30 m dam. The pools are stocked with introduced *tilapia* fish. Residential suburbs of Riyadh are built to the lip of the wadi in places. Despite my many years residence in Riyadh I was unaware of this wadi until August 1995 when a flying instructor friend, Sav Savill, flew over it and saw the pools.

I made a preliminary visit to the wadi in August 1995. On my second visit on 15 December 1995 I saw a large bird against the sky about 1 km away. In good light its underbody appeared reddish with a more gingery tail and an overall appearance of a long-legged buzzard *Buteo rufinus* but no carpal patches were visible. Two more raptors appeared in the same field of view and as they dropped against the brown escarpment, the white mantle and upper tail patches of Bonelli's eagle *Hieraetus fasciatus* were obvious on both birds. Within the space of five minutes one of the adult birds had stooped at the other half a dozen times before all three disappeared behind a rock buttress. A most unusual record for a bird normally associated with the solitude of high mountains and not at all known for enjoying the nearness or conviviality of humans or the noise and rattle of heavy lorries which continually plied the track at the bottom of the wadi with rock and aggregate.

I visited this location in the wadi every afternoon for the next few days and saw two adult Bonelli's plus on some occasions, one or two sub-adult birds as well but only on one occasion did the original "ginger" juvenile appear.

On 25 December 1995 I located two adult Bonelli's eagles on a ledge of the escarpment plucking a prey object (thought to be a rock dove or feral pigeon *Columba livia*). Five metres above the ledge was a large nest composed of sticks and to which one or other of the birds frequently repaired and adjusted some of the sticks comprising the nest. Further observation of this stretch of cliff/escarpment showed the sites of four other "stick-nests", possibly Bonelli nests but they could also have belonged to brown-necked ravens *Corvus ruficollis*, which I had observed in the wadi on a previous visit. An adult Bonelli sat on the nest throughout February, occasionally accompanied by its mate.

Unfortunately, I was then absent from Riyadh for twelve weeks but on the 14 June I was able to visit the nesting site. I found a juvenile bird sitting contently on the nest but it flew off up the wadi a few minutes later and joined two adult birds (parents presumably) on a rocky buttress. This is the first confirmed breeding of Bonelli's eagle in the Riyadh area.

The Bonelli's are not however the whole avian story of the Wadi Nimar. Also on 14 June twenty seven other species were found to be breeding, or had probably bred that season in the wadi. These were; little grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis* (adult and four chicks), little bittern *Ixobrychus minutus* (four pairs plus juveniles); night heron *Nycticorax nycticorax* (two juveniles),

purple heron *Ardea purpurea*, (two juveniles), squacco heron *Ardeola ralloides*, mallard *Anas platyrhynchos* (pair with four juveniles), kestrel *Falco tinnunculus* (adult with four juveniles; sand partridge *Ammoperdix heyi*, moorhen *Gallinula chloropus* (four pairs with chicks), coot *Fulica atra* (adults and juveniles), black winged stilt *Himantopus himantopus* (twenty adults plus fully grown juveniles and incubating birds), little ringed plover *Charadrius dubius* (six pairs and two nests with eggs), collared dove *Streptopelia decaocto*, palm dove *Streptopelia senegalensis*, rock dove *Columba livia*, little green bee-eater *Merops orientalis* (several adults many juveniles), hoopoe *Upupa epops* (adult carrying food), desert lark *Ammonomanes deserti*, crested lark *Galerida cristata*, pale crag martin *Ptyonoprogne fuligula*, white-cheeked bulbul *Pycnonotus leucogenys* (adult sitting on nest) yellow-vented bulbul *Pycnonotus xanthopygus*, blackstart *Cercomela melanocephala*, white-crowned black wheatear *Oenanthe leucopyga*, scrub warbler *Scotocerca inquieta*, reed warbler *Acrocephalus scirpaceus* (two adults feeding two young), olivaceous warbler *Hippolais pallida* (one pair at nest in tamarisk) and brown-necked raven *Corvus ruficollis*.

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Fig 16 Spotted crane *Porzana porzana*, often suspected of breeding in Arabia but still not yet proven.

Credits

Word processing Lorraine Russell. Artwork: Bonelli's eagle - C J F Coombs; skylark, short-toed eagle, lesser flamingo and pratincole - Gerald Driessens; spotted crane - Mike Langman; bald ibis - Ian Lewington; golden oriole - Geof McMullan; houbara - Patrick Paillat; brown booby - Dave Showler; and black-crowned finch - Hilary Welch. Maps at Fig 6 and 14. MCJ. Software and computer consultant Terry Rowell. Printed by Lakeshore Graphics, Nottingham UK.

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